



NEW YORK STATE
SCHOOL FACILITIES ASSOCIATION

TESTIMONY

by

New York State School Facilities Association

(Formerly, NYS Association of Superintendents of School Buildings & Grounds)

Joint Fiscal Committees of the New York State Legislature
Hearing on the FY 2016-17 Executive Budget

Wednesday, January 27, 2016

On behalf of the 600 School Facilities Professionals – members of *New York State School Facilities Association* – who represent over 700 of New York’s public school districts and 36 BOCES, we are grateful for the opportunity to submit written testimony to share with you our thoughts regarding the 2016-17 Executive Budget and present our 2016 legislative and budget priorities.

The New York State School Facilities Association is a professional organization comprised of dedicated men and women responsible for maintaining and operating thousands of school facilities across our state. NYSSFA members are committed to ensuring the safety, health and comfort of the students and staff.

There are over 3,050 school buildings in New York State. These buildings are the places of learning and growth for over 2.7 million students and must be consistently conducive to learning. This means they must have adequate space, equipment and capacity. They must be clean, bright, safe and appropriately maintained.

TODAY’S SCHOOLS

On any given day, a school facilities professional might work creating new infrastructure, maintaining quality spaces, or repairing complex equipment. Our members pride themselves on solving problems and impart that logic in our advocacy. We work hard every day to maintain facilities that are inviting and suitable places of learning; that communicate to our students and staff that what they do in these rooms is important.

All too often our mission becomes a struggle just to get by, to find a way. As we strive to provide essential services, too often we can only provide a “make-do” answer. This just doesn't make sense for our members, our students, our staffs or our communities.

Education is changing. As such our facilities must also adapt to those changes in a fiscally responsible way that takes into consideration maintenance, energy, and eventual replacement or upgrades. It takes a professional with knowledge of current best practices in efficiency, green products, procurement, and management to ensure that the funds invested in school facilities and grounds meet the needs of students, faculty and our communities.

NYSSFA asks for your consideration of the following recommendations:

SUPPORT THE OFFICE OF FACILITIES PLANNING AT THE NYS EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

On behalf of our members, we would like to thank you for supporting additional resources for the Office of Facilities Planning at the New York State Education Department last year. As you know, all construction of new buildings, additions, alterations or modernization of district-owned buildings, the purchase of existing structures for school purposes, and for lease and installment purchase payments under certain circumstance are reviewed, approved and supported by the

NYSED Office of Facilities Planning. This office is staffed by highly qualified professionals, including engineers and architects. Unfortunately, staff positions in this office had been reduced dramatically. The support provided last year was a solid step forward in rightsizing the Office by providing them the resources to hire additional staff. Our districts rely on this office daily.

While the Office of Facilities Planning is supported by highly qualified professionals, the software system they rely on is now ineffective and outworn. The software system was acquired by the Department in 1987 and runs on an obsolete DOS-based platform. The system is no longer supported by the original manufacturer and it is anticipated that it will reach capacity and fail in the near future. If the Department loses the ability to issue building permits, track and report on projects, and pay out building aid, the cost to local school districts in delayed work is inconceivable. An investment in a new facility planning system will allow the Office to replace outdated business practices, decrease the timeline for processing applications, allow local districts to check on the status of their projects, and merge internal systems to allow for seamless and accurate sharing of data.

NYSSFA supports the New York State Education Department's recommendation for \$4 million in additional funds to support a new facilities planning system.

SCHOOL SAFETY FUNDS

New York State School Facility Association appreciates the continuation of the NYSAFE Act in the 2016-17 Executive budget, which provides enhanced aid for the purchase of stationary metal detectors, security cameras and safety devices for electrically operated partitions. As you know, BOCES are not eligible for these funds. We recommend beginning a discussion on how best to support students attending BOCES so they may be provided similar health and safety investments in the future.

MAINTENANCE FUNDING

The property tax cap has made it difficult for our members to advance conservation measures. While retro-fitting, upgrading and implementing management measures all result in short (3-5 year) returns on investments Boards of Education are hesitant to use current year funding on increased maintenance. In addition, there are no minimum standards for funding maintenance. As such many of our structures, equipment, and grounds age faster than necessary.

NYSSFA appreciates Assembly member Englebright and Senator Valesky for sponsoring legislation to establish a minimum standard for maintenance funding and allow school districts to make their investments outside the restrictions of the property tax cap. (A.3401 by Assemblymember Englebright and S.4197 by Senator Valesky)

BOCES CAPITAL PROJECTS

The New York State School Facilities Association appreciates the work of Assembly member Galef and Senator Marcellino in trying to resolve issues with the property tax cap as these relates to the capital expenses made within a BOCES budget. NYSSFA was pleased with the steps that were outlined at the end of the 2015 legislative session to address the issues administratively. Like others, we are concerned that no action appears to have occurred in the days since. With the property tax levy growth for school districts now capped at 0.12 percent next year, school districts will find it challenging to support the needs of their students. Schools will not be able to raise any substantial new revenue without obtaining a 60 percent supermajority vote in support of their budgets.

NYSSFA recommends a continued discussion on the property tax cap and the development and implementation of policies to alleviate some of the unnecessary burdens to the system.

ENERGY RESERVE FUND

Energy costs are a wild card for school districts. The cost of these commodities is very difficult to predict. Districts use many tools to address price fluctuations such as purchasing cooperatives. However, unlike any other factor that affects a child's education, the lights and heat must be on in order to provide our children with a sound education in a safe environment. Unfortunately, the fluctuations in energy costs make it extremely difficult for school districts to plan and budget effectively. Today, energy costs are at some of their lowest in a number of years, but this was not the case one, two or three years ago. Enacting legislation to permit school districts to establish an energy reserve fund this year would allow us to set aside a prudent amount for future years in which energy prices may be higher than predicted. Our members believe in planning now for tomorrow's needs.

NYSSFA appreciates Assemblymember Cahill and Senator Funke for sponsoring legislation to establishment of an energy reserve fund (A.1677 by Assemblymember Cahill & S.3642 by Senator Funke).

CONCLUSION

On behalf of the New York State School Facilities Association (NYSSFA), we would like to thank you for your continued support of clean, healthy, well maintained school facilities and the opportunity to offer our professional insight.

Respectfully submitted,

Frederick Koelbel
NYSSFA Legislative Committee Chair
Director of Facilities @ Port Jefferson UFSD
fkoelbel@portjeff.k12.ny.us