

*Buffalo City School District Budget Testimony Before
The New York State Legislative Fiscal and Education Committees*



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Buffalo City School District





Greetings Legislature (chairs and delegation members) first and Thank You for providing me with an opportunity to testify before you today and for your concern and unyielding commitment to ensuring that the needs of ALL children in our great state of New York, and especially (from my vantage point) in the City of Buffalo are met. My name is Tonja Williams and I serve as the Superintendent of the Buffalo City School District!

The Buffalo City School District extends our deepest appreciation to the Honorable Governor Kathy Hochul, our esteemed Western New York delegation, the Commissioner of New York State Education, Dr. Betty Rosa and Chancellor, Dr. Lester W. Young, Jr., as well as to each member who serves on our New York State Board of Regents. Please know that, all within our school district know and appreciate all of your efforts in helping us to meet the growing needs of our diverse student population.

As the second largest school district in New York State, the Buffalo City School District experienced a plethora of profoundly disturbing and unique circumstances that impacted our learning communities profoundly, in the midst of addressing continuing COVID- related needs over the last year.

Our school district already had monumental academic, social-emotional, transportation, and funding needs prior to the pandemic but after experiencing the shooting of a security guard and stabbing of a student outside of one of our high schools last February, the resignation of the district's educational leader and the

appointment of a new Interim Superintendent less than a month later, and then having a racially motivated mass murder of ten innocent people at a community supermarket two months after that, the academic and social-emotional needs of our children, families, and staff were greatly exacerbated.

Thus, I stand before you today, seeking your support to assist ensuring that each and every one of the students in the Buffalo City School District is positioned from every vantage point to access a high quality education in safe and supportive learning environments which will allow them to graduate College and Career Ready, regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, religious affiliation, zip code, sexual orientation, housing situation, and/ or the socio-economic status of their families.

The Buffalo City School District thanks this body for the much-needed increases in education funding to address inflationary pressures and the continued full phase-in of Foundation Aid. We urge you to craft a foundation aid formula that targets additional resources based upon the unique needs of our districts.

Charter Schools

We support school choice, which affords parents the option to send their children to Charter Schools. My concern with the expansion of Charter Schools in the City of Buffalo, is that we are now saturated with Charter Schools in our city. We have reached a tipping point, whereby 28% of school age children are enrolled in Charter Schools and the data overwhelmingly reveals deep and long standing structural inequities that are rooted in funding, recruitment and retention of students and staff, monitoring, and accountability measures at these schools; and even with these uphill challenges, in 2022 NYS ELA and Math results confirm that students enrolled in the Buffalo City School District overwhelmingly outperformed students enrolled in Charter Schools in the City of Buffalo. So what am I asking for today?

To acknowledge that the continued expansion of Charter Schools in the City of Buffalo does nothing to solve issues of student under-performance. There is a need to restrict the establishment of new Charter Schools, which in most all cases do not fulfill an unmet need that exists within the Buffalo City School District. Responsibly there must be an immediate formalized moratorium put in place, until there is an evidenced pattern of success in meeting the academic and social-

emotional needs of all students in the existing Charter Schools that are currently open.

I urge you to ensure that Supplemental Charter Tuition Reimbursement funded at 100% of the amount in legislation is reimbursed in the same school year the tuition is paid by the District.

Finally, the New York State Board of Regents must have the final say in approving new or expanding existing charter schools. SUNY's expertise is in managing higher education systems, not the education of K-12 children, and honestly it appears that in their over zealousness to approve the expansion of Charters, it could be deemed that the due diligence to critically review applications that come before them is not happening in a meaningful way. In conclusion, it has been found that the SUNY Charter School Institute is using loopholes in the current statute to renew charters for lengthy terms of 8 or 9 years. This insulates charter schools from annual accountability.

Health Services

The Buffalo City School District is experiencing escalating cost for student health related services. These cost were already climbing prior to the pandemic, as we must meet statutory obligations to provide health services to charter, parochial, and private schools in the City of Buffalo, but to do so without compromising services to our own students has become nearly impossible. We are very concerned that the Governor's budget proposal includes a cut in our health services allocation. I am asking for a permanent increase of \$3 Million dollars to the current \$5.3 million that the district receives.

Career and Technical Education

The Buffalo Public Schools currently boast more than 30 innovative and highly successful CTE programs which provide students with enhanced and much needed opportunities to graduate from high school, College and Career Ready. I am urging you to invest in BCSD Career and Technical Education programs, by increasing the Special Services Aid per pupil formula-based funding cap so that it is expanded to fund students CTE education beginning in grade 9.



Pre-Kindergarten Programming

The Buffalo City School District appreciates our Governor's ongoing commitment to funding pre-kindergarten programs which in our district begin at age 4. As a district where more than 85% of our children are eligible for a free and/ or reduced lunch, which is often aligned to students entering school with significant literacy, social, and mathematical skill delays. To have the ability to introduce formal schooling to children in our city earlier, at age 3, would be a huge benefit. I am requesting that the state fully fund 3Y educational programming in the Buffalo City School District and increase much-needed funding for our 4-year-old programs.

On behalf of the 30,000 wonderful, beautiful, full of potential children in the Buffalo City School District and their parents and caregivers, I will close, by taking an opportunity to publicly thank each of you and your staff members for your heroic and oftentimes, under-appreciated efforts to help to support increased opportunities for success, for the children in our schools. I would be remiss, if I did not, again share a deep appreciation to our New York State Education Department's Chancellor Young and Commissioner Rosa for their tireless and unyielding commitment to supporting the Buffalo City School District on a daily and sometimes hourly basis throughout the entirety of the pandemic.

In our great State of New York we must all be committed to speaking with **One Voice**, focused on **One Vision**, to accomplish **One Mission!** Thank you!!

Tonja