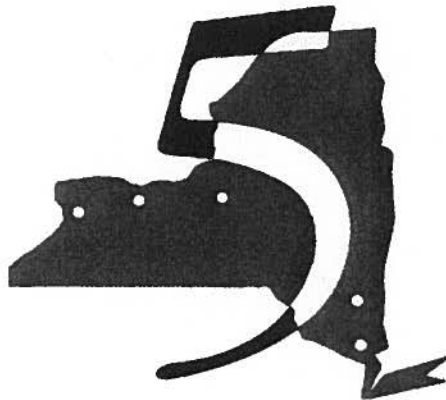


Conference of Big 5 School Districts
Budget Testimony Before
New York State Legislative
Fiscal and Education Committees



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Presented By:
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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 providing us with the opportunity to comment on the 2015-2016 Executive Budget. I will keep my remarks brief to afford the individuals with me time to speak. They are: Dr. Bolgen Vargas, Superintendent of the Rochester City School District; Ms. Sharon Contreras, Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District; and, Dr. Michael Yazurlo, Superintendent of the Yonkers Public Schools. The Buffalo and Utica Superintendents are unable to be here with us today. Each of these individuals will provide brief remarks on the status of their respective local budgets and the Executive Budget proposal. As such, I will limit my remarks to key funding principals that are critical to the State's urban school districts.

The Executive Budget would increase school aid by a little over \$1 billion in 2015-2016. Unfortunately, this amount falls

far short of what is needed to ensure that our school districts have the resources necessary to meet current challenges. The State fiscal outlook is much improved and revenue projections are positive. Therefore, we urge the Governor and the Legislature to provide a minimum of \$2 billion in additional school aid over what was allocated in 2014-2015. Furthermore, it is imperative that the Governor immediately release school aid runs to assist school districts across the State with budget preparation and planning. His refusal to make this data available is unprecedented. School districts should not be held hostage to State Budget negotiations over which they have no control. Furthermore, receipt of an increase in school aid should not be linked to district adoption of a revised APPR plan as is set forth in the Governor's plan. The Big 5 school districts are heavily reliant on State funds. We have no ability to raise local revenue given our fiscal dependency and have no expectation

that our struggling cities will increase their local share for education.

Each of our six school districts have demonstrated marked improvement in student achievement but more progress is needed. Additional funding is needed 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 and resources to enable them to implement the Common Core standards with fidelity.

We applaud the Governor for including \$3 million in new professional development funds in his proposed budget. These funds are particularly crucial given the loss of Race to the Top funds.

The Big 5 school districts enroll approximately 43% of the State's public school students and continue to experience enrollment growth. Furthermore, a significant portion of this pupil growth is attributed to newly arrived immigrants, many of which speak little or no English and are in need of expanded services and interventions. In fact, 75% of all English Language Learners and Limited English Proficient pupils 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 support is needed for these purposes.

This is only one of a multitude of challenges faced by the Big 5 school districts. Our schools have staggering rates of student mobility, homelessness and students living in temporary shelters. 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 is required in Education Law. Unfortunately, funding for these services has been frozen for many years. We urge you to provide targeted funding and to expand aid to New York City and Utica to assist them with increased demands for school health services.

Nearly 48% 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 87%; NYC 77%; Rochester 90%; Syracuse 81%; and Yonkers 69%.

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, the Big 5 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.

Lastly, we 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. In addition, the charter school supplemental basic per pupil tuition increase, which is on top of what was agreed to in last year's adopted budget, should be rejected until the inequities of the tuition formula are addressed. For example, legacy costs, such as retiree health insurance costs, should be removed from the calculation.

I will close now to allow the remaining members of our panel time to address you. 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.

