

Testimony Before

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

GOVERNOR'S EXECUTIVE BUDGET
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SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Good afternoon. I am Jaime Alicea and I have the privilege of serving the students and families of Syracuse as Interim Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, where I have dedicated my 33-year career in education. We appreciate the support that the Assembly and Senate have provided to public education with five years of school aid increases and the removal of the Gap Elimination Adjustment in last year's budget. Thank you for the opportunity 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 over 21,000 students. We have over 1,800 Pre-Kindergarten students, nearly 3,500 English Language Learners (ELLs) and approximately 1,000 students who are newly arrived to the U.S. in the last three years. Our ELLs speak 71 different languages and are from 66 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 23rd poorest city out of the 575 biggest cities in the U.S., 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.

2017-18 Budget

In developing our budget for the 2017-18 school year, we have specifically linked resource allocation with the expected impact on student achievement. In particular, the budget includes funding for the following priorities:

1. **Academic Intervention Services** to supplement the instruction provided in the general curriculum and assist students in meeting learning standards.
2. **Personalized Learning** initiative to transform education in SCSD by allowing teachers to use technology to tailor instruction to each student's strengths, needs and interests.
3. Additional instruction and support staffing for our **English Language Learners (ELLs)**.
4. Continued expansion of **Career and Technical Education (CTE)** programs in all of our high schools.
5. **Extended Learning Time** to provide additional instructional time, enrichment opportunities, and collaborative planning time at 15 schools serving over 9,000 students.
6. Expanded **School-Based Health** staffing to help meet the growing health needs of our students.

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 in ten years, as well as declining sales tax, Federal and other revenues. Due to expansion at our two existing charter schools and the recent approval of two new charter schools, we are projecting that charter school tuition alone will increase by at least \$5.9 million (30%) in next year's budget. Under the Governor's charter school tuition proposal, per pupil charter school tuition would increase by \$800/pupil, while the proposed Foundation Aid increase is only \$300/pupil. At this juncture, we are facing a budget gap of nearly \$17 million after factoring in the \$8 million state aid increase in the Executive Budget and using nearly all of our 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 (\$12 million)

With the Gap Elimination Adjustment gone, 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. We appreciate proposed updates to outdated portions of the formula that no longer reflect current levels of student need and school districts' fiscal capacity. However, we are deeply concerned with the elimination of the phase-in provisions of the original Foundation Aid formula and the creation of a new formula to calculate increases. We would also advocate for changes to the Community Schools Set-Aside in Foundation Aid. Current provisions unnecessarily restrict how we can prioritize and spend these funds and comes with a burdensome administrative reporting mandate. Districts need the flexibility to use these funds for existing community school programs.

While we appreciate the nearly \$8 million Foundation Aid increase provided in the Executive Budget, it falls far short of even maintaining existing programs in our district. We respectfully request a minimum Foundation Aid increase of \$20 million (\$12 million more than the Executive Budget) to avoid having to make devastating cuts to staffing and programs. We suggest increasing the weighting of ELLs and Immigrant student and include exiting and long-term ELLs to drive additional Foundation Aid. In addition, a portion of the funds from the \$150 million Fiscal Stabilization Fund could be directed to a Foundation Aid increase for the SCSD.

Student Transportation (\$4.6 million)

Advocates in our community have a laser focus on expanding transportation options for Syracuse students. While our nearby suburban districts are able to provide door-to-door bus service, the SCSD is currently unable to provide this level of transportation due to funding constraints. We are requesting \$4.6 million in targeted funding to cover reducing the walk zone from 1.5 to 1.0 mile for K-8 students beginning in January 2018. A possible funding source for

this request would be to broaden the scope of the \$35 million in After School Program funds to also include student transportation. We are also asking you to support legislation for a Pilot Program for Syracuse to provide Transportation Aid for all K-8 students who live more than 1.0 mile from school.

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 24 CTE pathways addressing career readiness in regional, state and national growth fields. Given the high-profile cybercrime and computer hacking incidents this past year, it is more imperative than ever to implement the Cyber Security and Computer Forensics pathways that we currently offer in SCSD. In line with recent state investments to develop Syracuse as a leading hub for drone technology, we are implementing a cutting-edge Drone Technology CTE pathway. We ask for an increase in Special Services 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 \$0.5 million. We also request that Special Services Aid be expanded to cover our 1,000 9th grade students enrolled in CTE courses, which would drive \$3 million in additional funding to our district.

School Health Services Grant (\$1.2 million)

Our school nurses struggle to keep up with the growing and complex medical needs of our students, who require frequent trips to the school nurse for attention to minor injuries, medication administration, and breathing treatments for asthma. For some students, the care they receive in their school health office is the only medical attention that they receive on a regular basis. The District currently employs 44 school nurses and 20 school health aides to provide coverage for our 21,000 students.

The state provides a \$1.08 million annual grant to Syracuse for school health services. While this funding covers the salary and benefit costs for 16 of our School Nurses, it has not increased since 2006-07 and is not enough to meet the growing health needs of our students. School Health Services grants should be expanded to more adequately cover the health needs of large urban school districts. We ask for your support to allocate Supplemental School Health Services grant funding of \$1.2 million to allow Syracuse to more adequately cover the health needs of our large urban school district. This would give SCSD parity with other large urban districts in Upstate New York who have received this supplemental funding in prior years.

Prior Year Aid Claims (\$2.5 million)

A school district filing a new prior year claim for state aid may not receive aid for as many as 15 years. These claims are the result of updated cost information and other issues that are often out of the district's control. Nearly \$2.5 million is owed to the SCSD for state aid claims that fall into this "Prior Year" category. We request that the state direct any unanticipated one-time state revenue (such as litigation settlements) to pay down prior year aid claims with high-need districts receiving priority.

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 \$23.8 million over the Governor's Executive Budget as I have outlined this morning would result in a total year to year increase of \$31.8 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.