



*Testimony Before The New York Senate Finance Committee,  
Assembly Ways and Means Committee, Senate Education Committee  
and  
Assembly Education Committee*

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Presented By:  
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## **Introduction**

Good afternoon. My name is Bolgen Vargas, Interim Superintendent of the Rochester City School District. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to speak to you today. I know you have or will be hearing from Chancellor Walcott and several of my colleagues so I will keep my comments focused on the budget impact on key district priorities for the budget: student achievement, student attendance and resource allocation.

## **Student Achievement**

Student achievement – as measured by state standards, GPA, SAT scores, and graduation rate – is the most important function of the district. Of course, it is not news to you that we face serious challenges to make significant improvement around this objective. The barriers that Rochester students face are well documented from high poverty rates to lack of stable family structures. We have many internal factors that impact student

achievement such as the school calendar and length of school days is too short for many of our students and important middle class-like school offerings such as well staffed libraries, music, arts and sports are too often sacrificed each difficult budget cycle. Given the high needs of our student population, we must offer many additional student supports that extend beyond the regular classroom.

Unfortunately, our ability to do so has been limited due to New York State funding reductions over the past several years. Many of the initiatives started under the Contract for Excellence have been reduced or eliminated altogether. We have reduced proven Time on Task programs such as Extended School Day/School Year, Middle and High School Restructuring efforts such as AVID and Early College Partnerships, and eliminated our Early Class Size reduction program.

State Aid funding reductions have had negative impacts beyond the Contract for Excellence. We have not only had to increase class sizes in elementary schools and secondary core subject areas, but also reduce offerings in Art, Music, Physical Education, Advanced Placement and other enrichment classes. The combined impact of these cuts seriously threatens any promising improvement to student achievement.

The recent decision by the State Education Department to suspend School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding has created another barrier to student achievement. Just when we are striving to provide a place of stability for children who often lack stable conditions in their lives, this funding change creates a significant impediment toward this effort. So I urge you to make sure that the Governor's proposal to withhold mid-year funding based on the teacher evaluation process is rejected. Rochester agrees that the teacher evaluation system needs

improvement and assessments of students' learning must be viewed as indispensable information but never, in and of themselves, as automatic verdicts on teaching and learning or schools. We cannot ignore the results of the professionals' work in any profession, which is why we remain determined to work collaboratively to turn this new challenge into an opportunity to improve our schools and to heighten the prospects for learning for all our teachers and students.

In Rochester, we are well on our way to meet the new teacher and principal evaluation systems, and hope that with the collaboration of all parties involved including the State Education Department we can come to a joint resolution as quickly as possible and not threaten resource allocations. We support the need for new teacher and principal evaluations, but impeding program offerings to support student achievement is not the way to proceed.

I would far rather see the legislators consider giving districts money earmarked for providing proven and much needed approaches to improve student achievement, such as longer school years and longer school days. In the Rochester City School District, I have a number of schools where the teachers, principal and school community are ready and willing to extend the day and the year. For example, I just received a request from one school to extend their year by five weeks to better meet the needs of their students. The whole notion that we give the same school day to all children defies the fact that we know students have different needs, particularly when we know that many of our children come to school behind their suburban counterparts and only fall further behind as evidence shows.

### **Student Attendance**

Student attendance is fundamental to student success. To that end, we have launched a comprehensive Back-to-School

initiative to increase student attendance and find appropriate placements for students who have dropped out of the educational process. Teams of Rochester City School staff and community volunteers visit the homes of students with excessive absenteeism or who have dropped out. The attendance teams work with the students and their families to re-connect them to the school district. Barriers to attendance are identified and the attendance teams work with the families to remove them.

Students who are on course for graduation from an age/credit standpoint are brought back into the classroom and provided additional supports to keep them on track for graduation.

Students who are not on track for graduation from an age/credit standpoints are assessed to determine alternative programs to assist them. These options range from credit recovery programs to Evening High School to General Education Diploma (GED) programs. The goal is to re-engage those students who have

given up on the educational process to enable them to achieve academic success.

The State could support our attendance initiatives in two critical areas: increased funding and flexibility with the Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) grant, and making Kindergarten attendance mandatory. Studies of Pre-Kindergarten education consistently show the positive impact on student performance throughout their educational career.

Although Rochester currently serves almost 90% of eligible students, increased UPK funding would enable us to enhance the program services which have been reduced due to the effects of flat funding over the past several years. Additional funding would also enable us to reach out to those students who do not participate in an effort to achieve 100% participation in the program. To that end, making UPK transportation costs eligible for State Aid purposes would increase student enrollment as



parents cite transportation needs as the top impediment to their participation.

The second area where the State could support our attendance initiative would be to make Kindergarten education mandatory. The current status has had a negative impact on our attendance initiatives for these students. Mandating Kindergarten would provide the leverage to enable us to improve the attendance pattern of students at the start of their education career.

### **Resource Allocation**

Rochester continues its efforts to allocate resources equitably to meet student needs in a responsible manner. In 2011-12, Rochester implemented a resource allocation methodology that more closely aligned resources with student needs. At the same time, we had to eliminate an \$80 million budget gap. This resulted in the elimination of 890 FTEs or

15% of our workforce in the initial budget. At the present time, we have identified a number of efficiencies that have enabled us to restore a number of programs and related staff so that our current staffing levels are 11% below last year's level.

The 2012-13 Budget poses similar challenges as we are faced with a \$44.3 million Budget Gap. The Executive Budget proposal will address \$12.8 million of the problem. We plan to manage the rest of the gap through the use of Fund Balance and a combination of program and staff reductions. As noted earlier, any program reductions are bound to have a negative impact on student achievement, especially coming on the heels of the significant reductions that have taken place in the current year. We are hopeful that the Senate and the Legislature will take into consideration the needs of schools as they develop their respective budgets.

## **Executive Budget Proposal**

We are pleased that the Executive Budget Proposal included a \$12.8 million increase for Rochester and maintained the integrity of expenditure based aid formulas. At the same time, we are discouraged that Rochester's Foundation Aid is almost \$18 million below 2008-09 funding due to the Gap Elimination Adjustment. As mentioned earlier, this reduction limits our ability not only to offer basic classroom programs, but in some cases prevents us entirely from offering the additional educational support our students need. We recommend that the State address this issue by fully funding the Gap Elimination Adjustment and return us to the 2008-09 funding level this year. We further recommend that the State commit to fully implement Foundation Aid funding over the next three years to enable districts to reverse the program decline that we have experience,

and instead implement programs to enable our students to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to express the needs of the children in my district.