

Syracuse City



School District

Sharon L. Contreras
Superintendent of Schools

SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT



Legislative Budget Hearing on the Executive Budget Proposal

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SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Sharon L. Contreras

Superintendent of Schools

Good afternoon Chairpersons DeFrancisco, Flanagan, Nolan, Farrell and the honorable members of your committees. My name is Suzanne Slack, Chief Financial Officer for the Syracuse City School District and I am here today representing Superintendent of Schools Sharon Contreras.

On behalf of Superintendent Contreras, I would like to begin by thanking you for your ongoing support of the children of the Syracuse City School District. We would also like to express our gratitude to Governor Cuomo and Commissioner King for their continued support of education. The executive budget proposal is an attempt to hold true to the promise made last year to increase funding to education by 4.1%. This is a commitment that was much needed and we are appreciative of it. We completely agree with Governor Cuomo's recognition that education is an investment, not an expenditure. It is an investment that demands results for a multitude of reasons but none more important than the future of our children.

The fiscal reality of today has required each of us to conduct business differently and to be as efficient as possible while ensuring our students are receiving the best possible education. The focus must always remain on what is best for our students and how we can prepare them to be successful in college and the workforce. In Syracuse the spending of our resources will be student-centered and not driven by adult needs.

There are several issues today which I would like to briefly discuss, including the impact of the Governor's state aid proposal, our previous budget cuts, and expense increases.

As indicated, we are grateful for the 4% state aid increase. However, we are respectfully requesting that this increase be allocated entirely to foundation aid. The Governor's proposal results in a \$5 million increase for Syracuse. Unfortunately, with the expiration of our Jobs Bill funding, our budget is essentially being flat funded at a level that is \$16 million less than 2008-09.

I assure you that we are taking every measure to reduce costs, improve efficiency, and most importantly to prioritize our limited resources on improving educational outcomes. As part of Superintendent Contreras' 100 day entry plan we not only looked internally at our district initiatives and operations but we also engaged five external reviews. The areas reviewed include: the District's finances; Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment; Special Education, Human Capital Management; and Information Technology. The recommendations of these reviews are being incorporated into our 2012-13 budget.

Superintendent Contreras has been very clear that our District must do better. We have a responsibility to our students and families, as well as the taxpayers of the City of Syracuse and the State of New York to increase student achievement. We have identified two high impact strategies that will transform our district: the development of a comprehensive core curriculum and ensuring that effective teaching is happening in every classroom. We are committed to implementing a new teacher evaluation system that will provide our teachers with required support and resources and are appreciative of the collaborative relationship that we have with the Syracuse Teachers Association and the Syracuse Association of Administrators. Lastly, we are aligning our expenditures with these high impact strategic priorities to ensure we are successful and are maximizing the community's return on its educational investment.

Like many other districts, Syracuse is grappling with a structural imbalance in our budget. There is a systemic issue of costs outpacing revenues. In the last two years we cut over 700 positions to balance our budget resulting in 240 layoffs. The first quarter unemployment expense this year was more than the entire prior year's expense. Not only can we not afford to keep staff on the payroll, we cannot afford to lay them off.

In the current budget year we have closed two schools and one program, consolidated two other schools into one, eliminated over 460 positions, negotiated wage concessions and wage freezes with our unions, and made significant programmatic changes to reduce costs.

We have essentially exhausted our fund balance. If our health insurance claims continue to trend higher than budget this year, we will totally deplete our fund balance. This is a \$10 million revenue decrease for 2012-2013.

The 2012-13 budget gap for Syracuse is \$35 million which may result in another 350-450 position reductions. This would be a 25% reduction in force over three years. Abolishing the Gap Elimination Adjustment in your legislative budget and redirecting

\$200 million of the competitive grants into foundation aid will provide an equitable distribution of state aid to our neediest children.

I would like to acknowledge the Governor's \$7 million in aid to support the continuation of the Regents exams. These exams serve as an example of the rich history of academic rigor in our State.

The Governor has acknowledged the need to expedite pension reform in New York State and we are in complete agreement. The current pension system is paralyzing school districts yet through his leadership and vision we can see a light at the end of the tunnel.

There are difficult decisions that need to be made during these challenging times and we are confident that the honorable members of this joint committee, the Governor and the Commissioner will continue to advocate for and support our children.

In closing, on behalf of the Syracuse Board of Education and Superintendent Contreras, allow me to reiterate our commitment to work collaboratively with the State Senate, State Assembly, Governor Cuomo, the New York State Education Department, Mayor Miner and the Syracuse Common Council to create a fair and balanced budget, as well as to transform our educational system to provide all children with the rich and nurturing academic programs they deserve.

We must not lose sight that the investment we make today not only impacts the future of our children, but the future of the great state of New York.

Thank you.