

Syracuse City School District

Building Our Future

*A commitment to the future of
the students, families and staff
in the Syracuse City School District.*

Joint Legislative Public Hearing 2023-24 Executive Elementary & Secondary Education Budget

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Superintendent

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Board of Education

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I am Anthony Davis and I have the privilege of serving the students and families of Syracuse as the Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, where I started my career as a teaching assistant and now have the honor and privilege of being Superintendent. I appreciate this opportunity to be here today to discuss the Executive Budget and the potential impact it may have on the students in New York, and more specifically, the students in Syracuse.

Firstly, I want to take a moment to commend and thank you for securing over \$150 million in federal stimulus funding for Syracuse and for your statutory commitment to fully fund Foundation Aid. The Legislature deserves tremendous credit for its efforts to allocate and deliver unprecedented financial support to our schools during the pandemic. As a result of your commitment toward funding public education, the children of the Syracuse City School District are on their way to academic recovery and success. Thank you for believing in our kids by showing your support with the financial resources that our children and their families deserve. With that being said, it is important to understand that the increased needs of children post-pandemic will continue long after the stimulus funding has expired. Therefore, your continued advocacy and financial support is crucial as we embark upon this post-pandemic educational environment.

DISTRICT OVERVIEW

Our District, like many others, has taken unprecedented steps to ensure that the unique needs of our students are being met during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Syracuse City School District serves approximately 20,000 students. We have nearly 2,000 Pre-Kindergarten students and nearly 3,000 English Language Learners who speak 69 different languages from 76 different countries. Nearly one out of five students in Syracuse receives special education services. More than three quarters of our students are economically disadvantaged, living in low-income households.

Syracuse continues to be among the poorest communities in New York State. In fact, based upon recent census data, Syracuse's children have struggled for years with some of the worst poverty in the entire nation. The overall poverty rate of 48.4% is the highest in the country among U.S. cities with 100,000 people or more. Over 7,600 families in Syracuse (27% of all families) live on less than \$25,000 a year and over 3,000 of those families (11%) struggle to get by on less than \$10,000 a year. This is the fifth highest rate in the entire nation.

Our combined wealth ratio (CWR) at 31% is less than one-third that of the average New York State school district. The district's pupil demographics, poverty rates and wealth measures, highlight our reliance on the State for adequate funding, especially as we continue to accommodate the academic and social-emotional needs of children as we transition to a post COVID-19 pandemic reality.

ADDRESSING ON-GOING CHALLENGES

Safe In-Person Instruction

This year we have been able to continually, and safely, provide in-person instruction to the students in the Syracuse City School District. We were amongst the first large school districts in the state to transition

fully back to in-person instruction because we understand the importance of having students in school every day. We expanded the use of air purifiers in all our buildings with two in every classroom and workspace including libraries and cafeterias. We worked closely with the Onondaga County Health Department and through a special collaboration with Wegman's Pharmacies we were able to provide vaccine and booster clinics for students, staff, and families in order to keep students in school. As we transition to a post-pandemic educational environment, we are constantly assessing the needs of our students and families, ensuring that we are responsive to their educational and social-emotional needs.

Academic Challenges

At the end of last school year, data confirmed that our students were in dire need of academic support. To address academic needs, we expanded our Reading Intervention and Math Intervention programs at all levels with the federal stimulus funds. This year we are implementing a 1:1 device initiative for high school students and will continue to provide every 9th grade student with a laptop for their high school career. We have also begun planning to expand this initiative for our students in grades 6-8 next year.

Far more preschoolers who were unable to access services during the pandemic need special education and related services. The impact of isolation and lack of access to in-person services has resulted in more than one quarter of our preschool students identified as in need of services, and we have expanded program offerings midyear to support them. We anticipate additional need for even more programs in the 2023-24 school year. We continue to adjust the continuum of services at all grade levels P-12 with extra attention to grade-level transitions.

Data clearly demonstrates that there is a disproportionate impact on learning loss on economically disadvantaged communities like Syracuse. To reengage our youth, we have appointed attendance teams in each school and have hired a districtwide attendance coordinator to support these teams. Every school has family engagement personnel, and we are hosting events to support literacy and numeracy outside of the school building. This critically important work helps all our students catch up on some of the skills needed to be more successful in schools, and we are excited about a range of tutoring programs to provide extra academic support for students in need. All our schools now have extended learning opportunities after school.

Social-Emotional & Mental Health Challenges

We conducted a Panorama survey with all our students at the end of the last school year. Based upon this data, it was clear that many of our students require interventions and supports to ensure their well-being. In response, the SCSD continued to recruit and hire additional school counselors, social workers, and social worker assistants. In addition, we created the position of parent aides to work in tandem with our office of family engagement, instituted school teams to monitor attendance and behavior, and hired health attendants to support our school nurses.

The SCSD realizes that it takes more than the school system to address the many, varied needs of students and families and therefore have held many community forums throughout the city at churches, community centers and schools to allow for community input on how we collectively can work together to improve the lives of our students. The SCSD is committed to establishing and expanding our partnerships with the community to foster relationships and build connections to support the needs of

our students inside and outside of the classroom. We understand the importance of community engagement and with your continued support we will further enhance our community collaborations.

We have begun to expand our partnerships with many of our community-based organizations to directly support several of our students with case management and family supports. These community organizations provide a safe after-school learning environment for our students while also providing some of the social-emotional supports that our students need. These agencies can recruit and hire staff that can relate to the needs of these students and have the skills necessary to address them.

We have several community schools where we leverage your financial support to address the needs of these students and families directly on school-site. These community schools coordinate resources from the community and bring them together to support our students and families. As we move forward, we are going to be looking at ways to further enhance this model and leverage our community resources to have a greater impact on more students and families. Continued legislative support is critical to the success of this initiative.

The district has established a multi-tiered system of support. To ensure universal supports for social-emotional learning, the SCSD continues to utilize a consistent SEL curriculum in grades PreK-8. We have transitioned over to the digital version to increase staff accessibility to resources and support reinforcements. Our 9th-12th grade high school teachers received SEL materials developed by teachers, materials that are relevant to the current needs of our high school students.

The SCSD, like many other of our Big 5 counterparts, has experienced a decrease in student attendance post-pandemic. To address this, the SCSD has instituted school attendance teams and has hired and placed program aides in every school building to collaboratively work with students and their families to resolve attendance matters and coordinate resources to address the underlying issues that are impacting their regular attendance. We have partnered with Onondaga County to provide resources in the form of ACCESS workers who engage with all our schools in providing and coordinating supports to families in order to decrease chronic absenteeism. Lastly, we are leveraging our ARPA McKinney-Vento funding to provide a wide-array of supports to our students identified as homeless.

Workforce Challenges

Similar to last year, this school year has also been plagued by workforce constraints. We are struggling to fill all positions – instructional and non-instructional. The year began with difficulty finding certified staff and now it is nearly impossible to find qualified staff at all levels. For example, we are operating this year with substantially fewer bus drivers and had to change school start and end times to accommodate route consolidation as a result of an inadequate pool of CDL candidates. It has been challenging to provide adequate continuity of instruction due to position vacancies and the intense need of supporting uncertified candidates in both content and service delivery. The need for certified special education and math teachers is particularly concerning, given the academic performance and social-emotional needs of our student population.

Staff are committed, yet overwhelmed, with the complex challenges of our community and needs of our learners. Community violence impacts our schools, and we have increased staffing to support proactive resources to address community conflicts while also maintaining safety within our schools. While we are

working to provide a safe and supportive climate and culture for staff and students, we do expect ongoing workforce issues in the coming school years. We are implementing initiatives in order to attract, support and retain top talent while being mindful of the cost considerations and the future expenses associated with compensation and benefits. We are providing ongoing professional development via job-embedded impact coaching, after-school and summer training opportunities and school-based and instructional themed PD for staff to ensure they have the skills needed to effectively teach our student population.

We are in our second year of implementing Impact Coaches for 2nd and 3rd year teachers to address the large numbers of uncertified staff. Recently, we developed plans to support uncertified teaching assistants, as our retention rate for these critical positions has been impacted by lack of orientation and development. All newly hired teachers have a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) coach. We are grateful for the opportunity to hire retired teachers to temporarily fill some of these critically important positions and are hopeful that the Legislature continues to provide school districts with this option. We are planning to overhaul our entire coaching support system for all certified staff positions so that we are not only competitive for talent, but also continue to develop and support our employees, ensuring better outcomes for students while also retaining diverse and effective talent. To assist in this work, we are adding a Director of Retention to focus human resource efforts on career development and growth.

Academic Achievement

While we serve some students well, the SCSD is not achieving the kinds of academic results our children deserve. Although our graduation rate remains over 70%, higher than it has been in decades, our achievement data indicate current and future cohorts of students are missing vital learning in order to maintain and improve that rate of high school completion. We continue to enhance our Career and Technical Education programming to respond to local workforce development needs while engaging our high school learners. These unique programs serve students from grade 9-12, and all eighth graders have the opportunity to participate in choosing which program best suits their interest and needs. These programs help our achievement move in the right direction, and we believe with your continued support and funding, our learning outcomes will begin to increase.

Our tiered math and ELA support and intervention rooms are staffed with reading specialists and highly trained math interventionists, which is showing promising results. SCSD students engaged in these interventions are on track to exceed our goal of improving performance levels by ten percentage points on our benchmark assessment, a trend we expect to see reflected in future 3-8 math and ELA testing. We would like to expand these intensive learning opportunities to more students in need over the coming years but can only do so with additional funding. We are all aware of the inarguably devastating impact of COVID-19 on our students, staff, and community and the effect on mathematics learning is of particular concern. Funding for the enhancement and improvement of our Tier I instruction along with districtwide intervention efforts will be critical, albeit time consuming and costly, as we train our teachers and teaching assistants in evidence-based practices.

Receivership

In the 2019-20 school year, the Syracuse City School District restarted three new thematic schools: Syracuse STEM at Blodgett Middle School, Expeditionary Learning at Brighton Academy Middle School,

and STEAM at Dr. King Elementary. We did so without additional state funding to pay for increased programming and services. We realized the critical importance of these restarts and the need for immediate change. School Turnaround measures require a tremendous amount of time, dedication, and funding to ensure the success of the school, staff, and students. Each of these three schools has smaller class sizes, more than 50% of staff changeover, oversight by an independent monitor, additional academic intervention services (AIS), instructional coaches for ELA and mathematics, special education programming and thematic technical support for STEM, Expeditionary Learning, and STEAM. These additional supports will remain in all three schools, with the potential need for increased support, as none of these schools have experienced a full school year of thematic programming without COVID-19 interruptions.

Two of our middle schools - Lincoln and Clary - remain in Receivership and both will continue to receive targeted supports including academic coaches, AIS in reading, mathematics and science, and professional development to support the progression of becoming an AVID Demonstration School and an authorized International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme School, respectively. We plan to continue the added academic and social-emotional supports in each school in 2023-24, along with the technical assistance from outside partners and NYSED to implement nationally recognized programming at both schools.

For students in these and all schools to continue making academic progress, we need additional funding to support community and school-based tutoring opportunities outside of and during the school day and increase exposure to learning experiences that enhance content knowledge for our children.

MOVING FORWARD

The SCSD has strategically utilized our additional stimulus funding and state aid to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students with the knowledge that some of these funds will expire in the coming years. We are planning for this reality but many of these initiatives that were instituted with these funds will continue to be required once these funds no longer exist and legislative support will continue to be instrumental in assisting the SCSD in meeting this post-pandemic challenge. Increasingly, children are coming to school in need of mental health services that are not readily available in the community. Understanding that student achievement is dependent on many factors, including the physical and mental well-being of students and their families, the SCSD will continue to partner with Onondaga County and community agencies to have services delivered in our buildings. Our social-emotional and health care support staff of nearly 150 professionals is supplemented with over 350 community agency professionals working with our students and families. The district expends over \$25 million per year on these needed services. We have implemented specialized teams to support students and families struggling through the pandemic, as the impact of social isolation, lack of access to community resources, and the challenges of engaging in virtual and interrupted instruction while balancing health needs has been overwhelming for many of our families. This intensive, personalized support requires additional funding to ensure each child and family is supported throughout the pandemic. Leveraging the Community Schools model requires additional funding to ensure we can reach as many families as possible.

LEGISLATIVE FUNDING REQUEST

Increase Foundation Aid

We greatly appreciate the State's commitments to fully funding foundation aid in the coming year and to providing additional resources in a transparent and equitable manner. We remain deeply concerned about the funding cliff looming once federal stimulus funds have been exhausted. As you may be aware, the Syracuse City School District has no ability to generate local revenue given our fiscal dependency on the City of Syracuse, where more than 50% of the properties are exempt from property taxes.

We strongly encourage the State to utilize updated census and poverty data and increase weightings for Special Education and English Language Learners (ELL) for equitable funding. Logically, this is the year to update the census data and use current, more accurate data to ensure that state funds will be allocated to students who need it most when the federal stimulus funds expire.

The next few years will be times of rising costs for the Syracuse City School District. We need to provide extensive and robust summer school support, during-school and after-school academic interventions and enhanced social and emotional support for our student's post-pandemic. These resources are not optional and will require additional funding for several years.

Increase School Health Services

School Health Services aid has not kept pace with student health and medical needs for years. This gap has widened as a result of the ongoing pandemic. SCSD funding of \$1.08 million essentially covers the cost of 12 nurses, yet we employ more than 50 nurses and 30 health aides providing essential services to all schools in the City of Syracuse including Charters and private schools. Nurses are essential to the daily operation of our schools and should be properly funded as an expense-based aid. The last three years have been overwhelming for our health services staff. Our nurses have been performing extra duties in order to continue to provide the best services to our students during the pandemic so that we can keep our schools open for in-person instruction. Currently, we have a full-time nurse at each one of our schools regardless of the enrollment in the building. We would like to establish a student-to-nurse ratio of 300:1 in order to continue providing essential health services to our students.

Expense Driven Aids & Instructional Materials Aid Enhancement

We encourage the State to fully fund and maintain expense driven aids and adopt the NYS Board of Regents proposal to increase instructional material aids including library materials, textbooks, software and hardware aid for inflation using resident enrollment instead of attending enrollment. These funds provide critical access to educational materials and the rates have not increased since the 1990s.

Increase Special Services Aid (CTE)

Special Services Aid for 9th grade students enrolled in Career & Technical Education courses should be provided for every school district. The current formula only funds students in grades 10, 11 and 12. Data is being collected and reported on 9th grade CTE students and this investment will provide

opportunities for students to be college and career ready. It is important that Special Services Aid is funded for *all* high school students in the CTE programs.

Additionally, consider creating a new reimbursement-based special services formula that would provide aid for a percentage of actual CTE costs as outlined in the Regents Proposal, or increase the cap on the per pupil rate by 33% (from \$3,900 to \$5,200 in 2023-24) each year for three years.

Other Legislative Requests

JSCB Phase III – Increase Borrowing Authority to \$400 million

Since the initial approval of the Joint Schools Construction Board (JSCB) Phase III to transform 10 schools across all four quadrants of the City, the construction industry has experienced unprecedented inflation with a 30% increase in the SED Facilities Planning Department’s Construction Cost Index. Additionally, the recently completed Building Condition Survey identified additional structural work needed at many of these schools. In order to provide the children of Syracuse with a modern learning environment in these 10 schools as planned, we are requesting that the project borrowing authority be increased from \$300 million to \$400 million.

Limit Charter School Saturation in a City or District

Limit Charter School saturation to 10% in urban centers allowing for school choice while limiting the financial burden on public school districts. In Syracuse, charter school enrollment has increased to 10% in recent years costing more than \$30 million. Students enrolling in charter schools are coming from every school and grade level in the district, making it difficult to offset additional tuition expense with reductions in existing District programs and classrooms.

Freeze Charter Tuition Rate

The Charter School Tuition Rate needs to be aligned with their expenses. The cost of operating a charter school without unions, pensions, legacy costs, OPEB, and with lower concentrations of ELL’s, students with special needs and students who are disadvantaged is much less than that of a traditional public school. Much of the taxpayer dollars funneled to charters either goes to their corporate oversight entity or adds to their equity. Taxpayer dollars should not be used to fund private for-profit margins.

Enact Reclaiming (Clawback) Provision for All Overpayments to Charter Schools

When charter schools return students to the district during the school year, we need to have the option to reclaim tuition payments. This would deter charters from releasing students back to the district at the time of state assessments, Regents exams, and graduation. Additionally, student attendance records must be provided by charter schools in a timely manner and tuition reclaimed for chronically absent students.

Discontinue SUNY Charter Authorization

Only the State Education Department should be allowed to authorize charters. The current system supports charters going to SUNY for authorization after SED has declined their application. SUNY does not have the same vested interest in P-12 education and does not require compliance with SED guidelines for operating a public school funded with taxpayer money.

Advance Payment of Supplemental Charter School Transitional Aid to the Current Year

Supplemental Charter School Transitional Aid is paid on a one-year lag. If the State would pay this aid in the current year, it would provide a one-year pick up in 2023-24, and then will help with cash flow thereafter. The district is mandated to pay Charter Tuition prior to receiving Foundation Aid (or risk having it intercepted) and then must wait a year before receiving Charter School Transitional Aid.

Student Health, Mental Well-Being and Nutrition

Establish and fund infrastructure to sustain critical well-being supports for students. All children have been impacted by the pandemic, however, those in urban centers living in poverty, with disabilities, and with language acquisition challenges have been particularly impacted and will need support long after the federal stimulus funds expire.

Teacher Shortage

The shortage of certified teachers in many disciplines is directly impacting our students. To address the teacher shortage this year and for years to come, continue the temporary waiver of the income cap for returning retirees, expand the alternative teacher certification process, simplify the certification process, and provide college tuition programs for students earning education degrees.

English Language Learners

Most pupils who are newly arrived in the U.S. are educated in the Big 5 School Districts. We respectfully request that the State provide more support for English Language Learners (ELLs) through a designated categorical program that will fund the services immigrant students need as they acclimate to school and learn skills beyond just language acquisition.

Fund Another Round of Smart Schools Bond Act (SSBA)

The pandemic emphasized just how crucial technology has become to education. Syracuse doubled the number of devices deployed districtwide and has had to add staff and enhance infrastructure to support the additional bandwidth, safe internet access, number of devices, training for staff and students, hardware and software to ensure that virtual learning can be supported. By funding another round of SSBA, the State can provide funding when approved and when needed to replenish devices and sustain infrastructure for the future of education. Otherwise, we will need assistance from the State to separately fund ongoing technology.

Expedite State Aid Payments to Beginning of School Year

Align State Aid payments to the beginning of the year to eliminate the need for short-term Revenue Anticipation Notes (RAN) borrowing. Additionally, fund the district in a timely manner, aligned with the Charter Tuition payment schedule. Districts are required to prepay Charters beginning in July, yet most of the district's aid is received at the end of January, March and June.

Adopt Federal Purchasing Thresholds

SUNY can make purchases using the federal purchasing thresholds and the same should be allowed for P-12 Education. Doing so will reduce the administrative work involved in the purchasing process and will expedite ordering timelines, which is critical in these times of supply chain disruption.

Federal Uniform Grant Guidance CFR 200.320 requires formal competitive bidding for purchases exceeding the simplified acquisition threshold which is currently set at \$250,000. Under current General Municipal Law 103, Districts must competitively bid Goods over \$20,000 and Public Works over \$35,000. If approved, quotes would still be obtained up to the \$250,000 limit which encourages competition yet involves a far more streamlined administrative process. SCSD is larger than many cities and municipalities and as such, has much larger dollar value purchases. SCSD would benefit tremendously if General Municipal Law 103 was amended to reference federal bid limits.

Mandate Relief

Allow School Funding Transparency Reporting Requirement to Sunset

Beginning with the 2018-19 Enacted State Budget, districts were mandated to report school-level budgeted expenses annually to New York State. Additionally, the districts report actual per pupil expenses annually by school building as mandated by federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reporting. Reporting both budgeted and actual per pupil expenses by building places an additional, substantial reporting burden on the SCSD, with little added value to the public understanding of district financial management. Allow this requirement to end this year as planned.

Remove the Community Schools Set-Aside Restrictions on Foundation Aid Funding

Since the 2016-17 Enacted State Budget, the State has implemented a Community Schools Foundation Aid set-aside. The district's current Community Schools set-aside amount is \$14.6 million. This set-aside restricts the use of general-purpose Foundation Aid to specific services and programs and places additional reporting requirements on the districts. Funding for these services and programs should be allocated through a separate state aid allocation and should not restrict a portion of general-purpose Foundation Aid funds.

Remove the High-Impact Tutoring Restrictions on Foundation Aid Funding

Although the SCSD is appreciative of the additional funding allocated, having these funds restricted for specific tutoring for students in grades 3-8 in only math and ELA prohibits the district from providing

services to many other students in other grades, and/or other subjects and will create another administrative burden on the SCSD with additional oversight and reporting on the uses of these funds. The Legislature should enable the school districts to utilize these funds based upon the needs of our students and families and not put forth restrictions on the use of these funds.

Remove Contracts for Excellence (C4E) Set-Aside Restrictions on Foundation Aid Funding

The SCSD is committed to investing in targeted programs that raise student achievement for students with the greatest educational needs and has consistently exceeded the minimum C4E spending set-aside requirements for these programs since 2008. The administrative and reporting requirements to demonstrate the district's continuous compliance with the C4E initiatives are a significant and unnecessary burden. These programs have become standard during the fifteen years that C4E has been in place. We ask that the \$12.7 million C4E Foundation Aid set-aside and reporting requirements be discontinued.

Remove Proposal to Establish Pre-K Enrollment Reporting

Pre-K funding is directly correlated to enrollment and by establishing a new reporting requirement for all school districts eligible for funding to report Pre-K enrollments by September 1st (earlier than the required BEDS reporting), school districts will not be able to enroll students once the school year starts. Many of these young children are already behind academically and social-emotionally and this will be detrimental to the needs of our students and families. This will negatively impact those disadvantaged students with limited parental involvement who reside in the Big 5.

CONCLUSION

In closing, the issues facing the Syracuse City School District these past three years are not going to vanish next year, or the year after that. We are preparing for a new post-pandemic reality and will need the support of the Legislature to address these current and future changes. CRRSA & ARPA have temporarily provided the financial support needed to address these issues. When these funding supports expire, the needs of our students will continue, and we will need continued State Aid increases and funding support to appropriately address these academic and social-emotional needs. We recognize our obligation and are committed toward ensuring that all students have the educational opportunities that they rightly deserve and that we prepare them for future success in college and careers.

Again, on behalf of the children and families of the Syracuse City School District, I thank you for your continued support in helping us achieve the level of funding required for us to continue the important work of educating our students. Working together, we can maximize your education investments for the benefit of all the children and families in New York State.