

Syracuse City School District

Building Our Future

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

Joint Legislative Public Hearing 2022-23 Executive Elementary & Secondary Education Budget

**Jaime Alicea
Superintendent**

January 26, 2022

Board of Education

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I am Jaime Alicea and I have the privilege of serving the students and families of Syracuse as Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, where I have dedicated my 39-year career in the District, the last six as Superintendent. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the Executive Budget and the potential impact it will have on the students in the Big 5, and specifically, on the students in Syracuse.

I want to take a moment to commend you and to 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 their effort to deliver and allocate unprecedented financial support to schools during the pandemic. As a result of your commitment to fund 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 and showing your support with financial resources long-term. Please understand that the increased needs of children post-pandemic will continue long after the stimulus funds have expired. Therefore, your continued financial support is crucial.

District Overview

Our District, like many others, has taken unprecedented steps to ensure that the unique needs of our students are being met during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Syracuse City School District serves more than 20,000 students. We have nearly 2,000 Pre-Kindergarten students and nearly 3,200 English Language Learners who speak 77 different languages from 84 different countries. More than three quarters of our students are economically disadvantaged from low-income households. Nearly one out of five students in Syracuse receives special education services.

Syracuse continues to be among the poorest of the Big 5 School Districts. Our combined property and income wealth (CWR) is less than one-third that of the average New York State school district at 29%. The District's pupil demographics, coupled with wealth measures, highlight our reliance on the State for adequate funding, especially as we continue to accommodate changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Solving On-going Challenges

Safe In-Person Instruction:

This year we have been able to safely provide in-person instruction to the students in the Syracuse City School District. We expanded the use of air purifiers in all our buildings with two in every classroom and workspace including libraries and cafeterias. We have been working closely with the Onondaga County Health Department and through a special collaboration with Wegman's Pharmacies, we have been able to provide vaccine and booster clinics for students, staff and families in the City in order to keep students in school.

We offer weekly pool testing in all our schools so we can monitor the spread of COVID in the District. Additionally, we offer weekly testing to non-vaccinated staff. For the last three weeks we have been able to offer COVID testing kits to our students and staff thanks to the Office of the Governor. All these measures allow us to maintain safe in-person instruction for students.

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 program and added Math Intervention at all levels with the federal stimulus funds. We provide remote instruction for our students with compromised health. This year we are rolling out 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.

Many of our students receiving synchronous instruction are special needs and we are providing them with virtual instruction and related services, tele-therapy, speech resources and individualized resources. We continue to adjust the continuum of supports at all grade levels P12 with extra attention to grade level transitions.

Without the administration of the State NYSLAT assessment, we have implemented a local assessment, National Geographic, to keep track of English and Spanish proficiency of our English Language Learners.

In January we released updated pacing guides districtwide in response to feedback from our teachers that the students were unable to keep up the current pace of learning expectations.

Social-Emotional & Mental Health Challenges:

Panorama survey results from the end of last school year and again this fall identified student needs that require intervention and support to ensure their well-being. We used this data to scaffold a system of supports and resources for students. To address social emotional needs, we added guidance counselors, social workers, social worker assistants, and parent aides in the office of family engagement, school teams to monitor attendance and behavior, and health attendants to support nurses. Students returned to school campus exhibiting increased behavioral issues after more than a year of not being in school full-time.

We provide intensive tiered levels of support and we rolled out Social-emotional curriculum resources PreK – 12 with scope and sequence and believe these increased measures will be needed for many years to come. This social-emotional support is embedded in our master schedules to make sure time is focused on mental health and well-being every school day. Multi-tiered system of support is an effort for all schools to look universally at student support building-wide then filter down to individual and small group needs. The School Team Institute was rolled out, including classroom management, school behavior management, PBIS, and operational systems. Then we bring students into small groups with established interventions to address attendance, behavior and academic data. We partner with many community-based organizations to provide intensive one-on-one student intervention as needed.

Also, attendance matters are addressed by school attendance teams and program aides in every school building to work with students and their families to resolve attendance matters.

Workforce Challenges:

This 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 50 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 teachers out for quarantine or illness. We temporarily closed seven schools due to essential staff on quarantine and no subs available.

Staff are exhausted and burned-out. We have held listening sessions and a staff survey and responded to staff concerns by re-pacing curriculum and lessons, adding coaching support, rescheduling assessments, and providing more flexible paid time-off. Human Resources has provided affinity groups, book clubs, virtual circles, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), *SCSD Cares*, and building climate and culture workgroups. We expect the workforce issues will continue in the coming school years.

This year we implemented Impact Coaches for 2nd and 3rd year teachers since student-teaching experience was limited by COVID. All new hires have a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) coach. Additionally, school leaders are provided Equity Coaching and a culturally and historically responsive education (CHRE) seven-part webinar series over the year on how to support instruction with a CHRE lens.

Academic Achievements

While we still have much to achieve, we are making good progress. As previously mentioned, our 2016 cohort graduation rate of 70.7% is the highest it's been in two decades and with 24.4% of these graduates receiving a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation. Our focus on Career and Technical Education (CTE) has contributed to the increased overall graduation rate. 2017 cohort data is expected to have an even higher graduation rate.

These trends are moving in the right direction and I believe with your continued support and funding, will continue to rise. Last year we implemented tiered ELA support and intervention rooms staffed with reading specialists and the early results are promising. This time last year, SCSD students were on track to exceed our goal of improving ten percentage points on our benchmark assessment, a trend we expected to see in the 3-8 ELA test. I would like to do the same for mathematics but can only do so with the additional funding. We are all aware of the yet-to-be measured yet inarguably devastating impact of COVID-19 on our students, staff, and community. The expected effects on mathematics learning is of concern, and funding for our districtwide intervention efforts will be critical.

Receivership

Last year, Syracuse closed and reopened three new thematic schools, Syracuse STEM at Blodgett Middle School, Expeditionary Learning at Brighton Academy Middle School and STEAM at Dr. King Elementary, with no additional state funding to pay for increased programming and services. 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 have smaller class size, more than 50% different staff, oversight of an independent monitor, additional AIS, ELA, special education and mathematics coaches and thematic technical support for Expeditionary Learning, STEM and STEAM. These additional supports will remain in all three schools, with the potential need for increased support to overcome the interruption of COVID-19.

Two of our middle schools remain in Receivership, Lincoln and Clary, and both will continue to receive academic supports including academic coaches, reading, mathematics and science AIS, and professional development to support the progression of becoming an AVID Demonstration School and an authorized International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme School. We plan to continue the added academic and social-emotional supports in each school in 2020-21, along with the technical assistance to implement nationally recognized programming at both schools.

For students in these and all schools to continue making academic progress, we need additional funding.

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 wellbeing of students and their families, the District partners with the County and community agencies to have services delivered in our buildings. Our social-emotional and health care direct support staff of nearly 150 professionals is supplemented with over 350 community agency professionals working with our students and families. The district spends over \$20 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 and the challenges of engaging in virtual instruction while balancing health needs has been overwhelming for many of our families. This intensive, personalized support requires additional funding to ensure each child is supported throughout the pandemic.

Separately, students in our District meet the Community Eligibility Provision, which means that all students receive free breakfast, lunch and snack in school daily. The current structure with in the State Education Department works well and I ask that it remain with SED and not shift to Agriculture and Markets as food service programs directly impact education.

Legislative Funding Request

Foundation Aid:

We appreciate the states commitment to fully funding foundation in the coming two years and the commitment 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. Syracuse has no ability to general local revenue given our fiscal dependency on the City.

Utilize updated Census and poverty data and increase weightings for Special Education and English Language Learners (ELL) for proper funding. 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, academic intervention for mathematics and enhanced social and emotional support to our students 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 and we employ over 50 nurses and over 35 health aides providing essential services to all schools in the City of Syracuse including Charters and Parochial schools.

Nurses are essential to the daily operation of our schools and should be properly funded as an expense-based aid. The last two 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. I would like to establish a student to nurse ratio of 300:1 in order to continue to provide essential health services to our students.

Expense Driven Aids & Instructional Materials Aid Enhancement

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. These funds provide critical access to educational materials. These aid categories have not increased since the 1990s.

Increase Special Services Aid (CTE)

Provide Special Services Aid for 9th grade students enrolled in Career & Technical Education courses. 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. We have begun introducing CTE courses to middle school students and long-term our students will be entering high school with a CTE credit. It is important Special Services Aid is funded for all students in the CTE programs, including freshman.

Additionally, increase the cap on the per pupil rate by 33% (from \$3,900 to \$5,200 in 2022-23) each year for three years as outlined in the Regents Proposal.

Advance Payment of Charter School Transitional Aid to the Current Year

Charter School Transitional Aid is paid one-year lag. If the State would pay this aid in the current year, it would provide a one year pick up in 2022-23 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) then must wait a year before receiving Charter School Transitional Aid.

Prior Year Claims

Restore annual funding of prior year claims. Syracuse has \$2.3 million primarily in Excess Cost Aid which is funding for our most needy students.

Other Legislative Requests

Limit Charter School Saturation, Freeze Tuition Rate & Discontinue SUNY Authorization of Charters

Limit 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.

Reduce Charter Tuition Rate:

The Charter School Tuition Rate needs to be aligned with their expenses. Without unions, pensions, legacy costs, OPEB, and high concentrations of ENL, Special Needs and high-poverty students, the cost of operating charters is much less than that of a public school. Much of the tax-payer dollars funneled to Charters either goes to their corporate oversight entity or adds to their equity. Tax payer dollars should not be used to fund private for-profit margins.

Enact Reclaiming (Clawback) Provision:

When Charter Schools return students to the District during the school year, then previous tuition payments must be reclaimed to ensure that students are not returned at the time of state assessments, regents exams and graduation. Additionally, student attendance records must be provided by Charter Schools timely 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 P12 education and does not require compliance with SED guidelines for operating a public school funded with tax payer money.

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 supports long after the federal stimulus funds expire.

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 need 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 timely aligned with 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.

Teacher Shortage:

Implement the Board of Regents recommendations to address the teacher shortage this year and for years to come. Temporarily waive the income cap of returning retirees, expand the alternative teacher certification process, simplify the certification process, and provide college tuition programs for students earning education degrees.

Fund ESSA Mandated Participatory Budgeting:

Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools are required to implement Participatory Budgeting with no additional funding. CSI schools should be given at least \$10,000 for Participatory Budgeting allowing the students and community to actively engage in meaningful improvement to increase student achievement.

English Language Learners:

Most pupils who are newly arrived in the US are educated in the Big 5 School Districts. The State needs to provide more support for English Language Learners (ELLs) through a designated categorical program to fund the services immigrant students needs as they acclimate to school and skills beyond just language acquisition.

Continue Funding of CSE Special Education Placements:

Our most vulnerable students depend on the Districts ability to provide appropriate educational services. Some students need the advanced services of residential placements which we have been able to provide

with State Funding. Shifting more of the financial burden to the District would have an adverse effect on services provided to our most vulnerable children.

Adopt Federal Purchasing Thresholds:

SUNY can purchase using the federal purchasing thresholds and the same should be allowed for P12 Education. Doing so will reduced 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 encourage competition yet involve far more streamlined administrative process. SCS D is larger than many cities and municipalities and as such, has much larger dollar value purchases. SCS D would benefit tremendously if General Municipal Law 103 was amended to reference federal bid limits.

Medicaid CIN Numbers & Free Care:

CIN Numbers:

Since 2016 school districts have been missing out on Medicaid funding for services provided to eligible students because of the 'exact match' requirement. Prior to 2016 CNYRIC was contracted by the state to assist school districts n CIN matching.

Free Care

Medicaid reimbursement should be allowed for non-IEP services provided to students including 504 Services, assessments, physicals, nursing care, technological supports and other accommodations as needed.

Conclusion

In Closing, the issues facing the District these past two years are not going to magically disappear next year, or the year after that. CRRSA & ARPA has provided the financial support needed. When this funding expires, student needs will continue, and we will need on-going State Aid increases to properly meet students where they are and to ensure that all students have the educational opportunities to ensure their success in college and careers.

Again, I thank you for your continued support by helping us achieve the level of funding required for us to continue the important work of educating our students. Working together, we can make the most of the education investment in all of New York State's children.