



Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Foundation Aid Testimony

before

Rockefeller Institute of Government

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Presented By:

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Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Pyle. I serve as Executive Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts, representing the Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, Albany, Mount Vernon and Utica City School Districts. Thank you for affording me the opportunity to testify before you today.

Collectively, the Big 5 School Districts enroll 43% of New York State's public school students. Our school districts faced significant challenges prior to the pandemic and these have only been exacerbated. It is imperative that the State commit to a revised Foundation Aid formula that is transparent, predictable and distributes funding in an equitable manner reflective of unique student needs.

The Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit concluded that the school aid formula was not succeeding in delivering funding in a fair and equitable manner. As cited in the decision, there are measurable inputs that must be considered when defining a sound basic education. The Foundation Aid formula must be updated to ensure that it truly reflects the costs of educating all students and recognizes unique pupil needs.

Furthermore, increases must keep pace with expenses related to providing additional services as well as inflation.

Each of the Big 5's member school districts have experienced enrollment shifts in recent years that can be attributed to pupils who are newly arrived to the United States, including large numbers of refugee students who speak little or no English and are in need of expanded services and interventions. In fact, approximately 67% of all English Language Learners are educated in the Big 5. Furthermore, 50% of the State's special education students (ages 5-21) are educated in our school districts.

In addition, the percentages of pupils living in poverty in the Big 5 are staggering as are the rates of student mobility and homelessness. The utilization of Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) as a measure of poverty under Foundation Aid must be revisited. Given the establishment of the Community Eligibility Program in our school districts, whereby all students are eligible for free lunch, there is little incentive for parents to fill out eligibility forms. As a result, FRPL

percentages are decreasing and inaccurate, despite extraordinary efforts to encourage parents to complete the forms.

The current Foundation Aid formula targets State Aid to high-need school districts via the calculation of the Pupil Needs Index (PNI). The community poverty data embedded in the formula, captured from the 2000 census, is extremely outdated and fails to accurately account for shifts in populations. The State must construct a new formula that is not only reflective of current community demographics but, most importantly, one that will continue to utilize inputs that are dynamic in nature and adjust as our ever changing populations shift.

Each of the Big 5 school districts are heavily reliant on State funds. The large city school districts have no ability to raise local revenues given their fiscal dependency and Albany, Mount Vernon and Utica are limited by the tax cap imposed upon independent school districts. Furthermore, there is no expectation that any of their respective struggling cities will have the capacity to significantly increase their local share for education in the foreseeable future. The Foundation Aid formula's Regional Cost Index should be evaluated and updated to

ensure that it adequately reflects variations in the cost of delivering services in different parts of the State.

The State must also commit to a sizable Foundation Aid increase coupled with a formula that is transparent and affords school districts predictability. This is imperative to ensure that school districts have stability and the ability to properly plan for the future. Flexibility in funding is also critical. Local funding decisions are best managed by school leaders who understand the unique needs of the pupils they serve.

We are pleased that the Rockefeller Institute recognizes that a complete overhaul of the formula will require significant time and resources. We urge you to use the feedback received and the data acquired to propose small adjustments in the 2025-2026 State Budget that will move us closer to a more equitable and adequate funding system and for the State to commit to a complete overhaul of the Foundation Aid formula. The State should also take action to conduct a new cost study to determine the per pupil Foundation Aid amount as much has changed since its inception.

In closing I want to thank you, once again, for the opportunity to address you today and stress the urgency of reforming the State's Foundation Aid formula to foster equity and adequacy. Every student, deserves the resources necessary to guarantee them opportunity and a chance to succeed. New York State's school funding system must be modified to ensure it truly accounts for pupil needs and is based upon a premise of equitable distribution of resources. We stand ready to assist you in your efforts and look forward to continuing to engage on this issue in the coming weeks and months.