



# SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Anthony Q. Davis, Superintendent of Schools

---

## Office of the Superintendent

August 14, 2024

To whom it may concern:

As Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, I am grateful for this opportunity to express my thoughts and concerns regarding proposed changes to the Foundation Aid Formula. Syracuse, and the other members of the Big 5 School Districts, are vastly different from the over 700 school districts in New York State and any changes to the Foundation Aid Formula should address these differences. Combined, almost half the students in grades Prekindergarten through High School attend our schools and we substantially rely upon a fair and equitable formula to ensure that we can provide our students with the academic and social-emotional supports that they rightfully deserve.

By now, you have read testimony from many stakeholders who have provided you with analysis and recommendations on how to change this formula. We all agree that this change is well overdue. I would like to use this opportunity for you to understand how this current formula and any possible adjustments would impact the Syracuse City School District, where over 84% of our revenue is derived from the State. As you are confronted with these challenging decisions ahead of you, perhaps some of my words will resonate and you will be able to envision how these decisions will impact one of the largest school districts in New York.

Syracuse is a unique city, whereby more than half of our properties do not contribute to the local tax-base. We have tax-exempt institutes of higher education, hospitals, houses of worship, community-based organizations, vacant properties, a landbank and PILOT agreements which severely limits our ability to secure property tax funding from the City of Syracuse. As a dependent school district, we do not have the authority to raise local property tax revenue and must rely on the City – the mayor and the Common Council, to arbitrarily determine how much funding we will receive from the property taxes.

Five years ago, the SCSD received \$61 million or 12% of our revenue from the City and this past year we received \$63.7 million which now represents less than 10% of the total revenue we receive. This amount of property tax revenue received is the lowest among the Big 5. The percentage of our local tax revenue in relation to our overall budget has declined each year for the past 14 years -reduced from 14% to 9.7%. This is a concerning trend which has made us extremely dependent upon State Aid. Your decisions on how these funds are derived in the Foundation Aid formula is paramount to our future and the success of our students.

Syracuse is also a city in transition with an optimistic vision for what the future will hold with the addition of Micron and the many subsets of businesses that will be calling our community home in the coming years. But today, based upon the 2022 census data for cities with more than 100,000 people, Syracuse holds the unenviable distinction of having the highest child poverty in New York State, and we are the second worst in the entire nation. Almost half our children live in poverty

using this measure and under the Federal Free and Reduced priced lunch guidelines, where the household median income threshold is lower, 86% of our students are considered living in poverty. The poverty in Syracuse has grown steadily since 2000, but the Calculation of Pupil Needs Index/Extraordinary Needs in the Foundation Aid Formula has not changed and currently uses outdated 2000 census data. This calculation greatly affects our funding while not accurately reflecting the current population of students we serve. In addition, utilizing the Free and Reduced-Priced Lunch data is less accurate because student counts are underreported in districts like Syracuse who are part of the Community Eligibility Provision. Poverty data from other sources, such as the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimate, may be better than Census or FRPL data. SAIPE data includes all students residing in the district, while FRPL only includes the students attending public schools in the district.

The number of high-need students continues to rise across school districts in New York and we are all acutely aware that the cost to provide these students with a sound-basic education is greater. In Syracuse, over 17% of our students are English language learners, many of whom come to our schools' mid-year with little to no English proficiency, let alone any formal education. The current foundation aid formula does not appropriately address the needs of these students, nor does it address these mid-year additional expenses.

Over 10% of our students are homeless. We ended this past school year with over 2,000 students without a home. The number of homeless students that we educate is greater than the entire enrollment of approximately 300 school districts (40%) in New York. These students come to school hungry, tired, and unprepared to concentrate on the lessons in front of them. These percentages and numbers are not seen outside of the Big 5 and are multiple times greater than our suburban and rural counterparts.

In Syracuse, over 20% of our students have Special Education identification. In the past three years, we are finding that more and more children are in need of special education services. Particularly, our youngest learners who were not able to access or benefit from special education services during the pandemic. In addition to the increasing enrollment number of these students, the required services that we must provide to these high-need students are more comprehensive, and therefore, more costly, than a decade ago. The current formula includes limited weightings for these and other high need special education students but also doesn't differentiate between the severity of need.

Our combined wealth ratio of 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 our children as we transition to a post-pandemic reality. The school system has no control over our community's wealth, yet we are penalized by the minimum limit within the Income Wealth Index (IWI) in the current formula. This is a measure of wealth in the district that is used to determine the local contribution in the formula. Currently, the Income Wealth Index is limited to a minimum of 0.65 and a maximum of 2.00. SCSD's Income Wealth Index would be 0.32 if this limit were not in place. The current restrictions make the Syracuse City School District look wealthier due to the minimum cap and therefore we receive less aid. Conversely, districts with more wealth appear less wealthy due to the maximum cap and receive more aid at the expense of those of us on the other side of the formula spectrum.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the elimination of the C4E and Community Schools set-asides. While this funding is critical, how those resources can be used is often just as important. We know our students, teachers and families so let the School District's determine how those funds will be expended to best meet the needs of our unique populations. Please don't limit the use of our resources with arbitrarily determined set-asides.

On behalf the Syracuse City School Board and our 19,000 students, I thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony and look forward to our ongoing collaboration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "A. Davis Sr.", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Anthony Q. Davis Sr.  
Superintendent of Schools