

Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Testimony on Education Priorities

***Submitted to the State of New York
Division of Budget***



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Conference of Big 5 School Districts

The Conference of Big 5 School Districts represents the city school districts of Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers.

- The Big 5 School Districts enroll over 40% of New York State's public school students.
- 75% of all English Language Learners and Limited English Proficient Pupils are educated in the Big 5.
- Nearly 70% of New York State's pre-kindergarteners are educated in the large urban centers.
- Over 42% of the State's special education students (ages 5-21) are educated in the Big 5.
- The percent of pupils with extraordinary needs in the Big 5 are: Buffalo 85%, NYC 79%, Rochester 84%, Syracuse 78% and Yonkers 70%.
- The Big 5 School Districts have high rates of student mobility, homelessness and students living in shelters.
- School buildings in the Big 5 are older than others in the State and average approximately 70 years old. Four of the five city school districts still utilize school buildings built before 1900.

Preliminary estimates indicate that most of the Big 5 districts will be facing significant budget shortfalls next year. While it is very early in the analysis, we have shared our districts' preliminary budget issues with the Executive and Legislative staffs.

2008-09 Budget Recommendations

Contract for Excellence

1. Given the pupil demographics of the Big 5 School Districts we should be permitted to utilize increases in Contract for Excellence funding on a district-wide basis, as well as for targeted interventions. In virtually all of our schools, we have some students struggling academically and in need of additional support. Without a systemic district-wide improvement, we run the risk of leaving out some schools and leaving some students behind.
2. The Contract for Excellence program should provide for a three-year period of sustainability in the initiatives we have implemented in order to more appropriately

measure achievements in student performance. These new initiatives began in September; however, the State testing schedule begins in January, leaving only four months to begin to measure effectiveness.

3. Several of the programs identified under the Contract for Excellence were already in place in the Big 5 districts prior to its enactment. This left fewer programmatic options under the Contract for Excellence initiatives in these districts. The statute should recognize these programs as meeting the Contract for Excellence criteria.
4. It is important for the public to understand that Contract for Excellence funding is targeted, or restricted, general fund dollars. There is a misconception that Contract for Excellence funds are in addition to traditional school aid increases from the State and that school districts have significant latitude in their application.
5. The State should be using the most current student data available in assessing student and district needs as a way to target funds. We understand the State is currently using three-year old data for implementation of Contract for Excellence programs.
6. The State should utilize one accountability system and move away from the multiple systems, such as SURR and SINI, which only confuse parents and the public.
7. Contract for Excellence funding should be permitted to be utilized in the latter years for school districts to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs that they instituted.

Foundation Aid

1. The phase-in of the Foundation Aid formula should be accelerated to provide more funding in earlier installments. The current phase-in at 20%, 22.5%, 27.5% and 30% backloads the increments.
2. Flexibility in funding will be critical to the sustainability and success of programs newly implemented.
3. The formula should fully account for poverty by removing the arbitrary floor established under the Income Wealth Index.

School Facilities

1. The State Building Aid formula for maximum cost allowances has not kept pace with the escalating costs of materials. We recommend capturing these costs, in addition to labor costs already identified in the Statewide index, to determine maximum cost allowances.
2. Given the high poverty, mobility and homeless rates in the Big 5, we seek an extension to Building Aid to allow for reimbursement for health and mental health school based clinics in city schools.

3. We also seek extension of New York City's Building Aid provisions which capture unique costs of multi-story school construction, site selection and demolition in New York City, to the other major urban areas of the State which experience similar unique circumstances.
4. We urge the State to provide a second round of EXCEL funding particularly for high need school districts.

Pre-K

1. Flexibility in the Pre-K program is critical to permit funds to be used to convert half-day classes to full day classes without penalty. The restrictions placed under the current program will prevent some of our districts from fully accessing these targeted funds.
2. The Transportation Aid formula should be revised to account for Pre-K pupils, particularly since full day Pre-K programs are an identified Contract for Excellence initiative.

Special Education

- We believe the State has an opportunity and an obligation to examine the effectiveness of our special education system and we urge the Governor to undertake such a review.
- We support the continuation of the Supplemental Public Excess Cost Aid formula.
- We urge our State officials to take a leadership role in calling upon the federal government to significantly increase funding under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While the federal IDEA statute drives most of the mandates in the delivery of special education programs and services, it falls far short of providing reasonable funding.

Technical Amendments

1. The Approved Operating Expense (AOE) calculation should exclude the grants rolled into Foundation Aid that were otherwise not used to calculate AOE such as Magnet Aid, Teacher Support Aid and Class Size Reduction. Capturing these grants in the AOE calculation will increase charter school tuition payments and decrease high cost excess cost aid.
2. The external audit requirement under the Contract for Excellence statute needs to be amended to reflect the amount of Foundation Aid funding permitted for current programs. There are conflicting statutes regarding the external audit provisions and the funding amount permitted for maintaining current programs.

3. The Supplemental Educational Improvement Plan (SEIP) Grant is identified in conflicting statutes of the adopted budget dictating different programmatic requirements under the Contract for Excellence and the District's desegregation court order.
4. The Big 4 Maintenance of Effort statute needs to be amended. We have encountered various implementation issues regarding the Big 4 MOE statute and have advanced amendments to clarify this statute and make its application more uniform across the cities.
5. Computer Hardware Aid for the 2007-08 school year was expanded to include allocations for non-publics. However, the formula limits total aid to the amount a school district spent in the prior year, before this expansion occurred. The formula should be modified to allow for current year reimbursement for costs associated with this expansion.
6. The recently adopted Charter School Transition Aid formula should account for all charter school pupils. Failure to do so will result in unanticipated current year funding reductions.