

Testimony to the New York State Division of the Budget Town Hall Hearing

Saturday, November 17, 2007
University of Rochester Medical Center

**Submitted by Jody Siegle, Executive Director
Monroe County School Boards Association**

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I am the Executive Director of the Monroe County School Boards Association. Twenty-one districts ranging from the City of Rochester to small essentially rural districts and two BOCES make up our membership. Our districts come together for training and to share information. I am here on their behalf to speak to three issues – principles of education funding, the Monroe County sales tax controversy, and Contracts for Excellence.

I have been involved in public education since first being elected to a school board in 1988. In the course of my career in education, I have seen periods where there was strong financial support for education as well as times like the 1991 mid-year reduction in state aid.

The reason I reference that experience is because my expectations and confidence in state funding for education has been shaped by many events. To counteract the annual changes in the State's funding levels and priorities, the districts in our organization have long sought improvements in the formula for state aid to education. We wanted a formula that would provide **adequate** funding **equitably** and in a way that would be both **predictable** and **sustainable**. The introduction of last year's Foundation Aid formula was a very welcome change, however part of the reason for my coming today is to emphasize the importance of the terms predictable and sustainable. We have heard the warnings about reduced state revenues combined with the discussion of proposals to adjust the foundation formula. Our concern is that a formula that changes every year is not a formula that can be used for planning. And planning is very important in a world where more is asked of education every year.

Last year's much heralded and appreciated increase in aid has had an unintended consequence here in Monroe County. Our county government looked at the new state aid for education and concluded that, since they had a persistent debt problem, they would claim for themselves sales tax revenues that are collected for the schools. Monroe County's sales tax sharing formulas are part of state law and the school districts do not believe that the county can unilaterally change state law. The county's actions have forced the school districts to turn to the courts to get clarification of the law, creating the awkward and undesirable situation of the county's school districts suing the county government

But the courts are not the only forum where this disagreement is being addressed. There is a political aspect to this issue and the school districts have become the object of an aggressive and hostile media campaign. The schools are being disparaged as greedy and spendthrift, as not willing to “tighten their belts” for the benefit of the county.

It is shocking that districts are suddenly the objects of attacks just because long needed state aid was finally appropriated. So please, as you develop the future budgets, include provisions to protect school aid from being used to justify revenue encroachment by other levels of government.

Lastly I want to talk about how Contracts for Excellence. I believe the designers of the Contracts saw them as a means to address entrenched pervasive problems like those they witnessed in large urban districts. Underlying the requirements of C4E’s is an assumption that without the specific guidance of the Contract, district leaders would be incapable of making good decisions for their students. Unfortunately they applied their assumptions too broadly and without adequate planning.

Monroe County has four suburban school districts on C4E’s solely because of the performance of one subgroup, students with disabilities – one count of inadequate performance out of hundreds of measures. And for those districts the Contracts have been a nightmare of meeting continuously changing requirements set by SED administrators who, frankly, are inventing the process from month to month. These districts have had to revamp their programs, file report after report, and eliminate support for successful programs to initiate new ones to meet contract requirements. For the most part they already offered the kinds of programs the Contracts asked districts to initiate.

C4E’s have led to a profound waste of time and resources and have been more of an exercise in compliance than a means to help needy students. I strongly urge you to carefully investigate the experience districts have had complying with Contracts before moving on with this program.

Thank you for the opportunity to address these issues.