

**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. As the Executive Director of the Monroe County School Boards Association, I work with 21 school districts ranging from the City of Rochester to small rural districts that regularly come together for training and to share information. I am here on their behalf to speak to three issues concerning the state budget – principles of education funding, the Monroe County sales tax controversy, and Contracts for Excellence.

To counteract the annual changes in the State's funding levels and priorities, the districts in our organization 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**. Last year's Foundation Aid formula was a very welcome change. But we have heard the warnings about reduced state revenues and discussions of proposals to adjust the Foundation Formula. I want to emphasize the importance of predictability and sustainability. As you look at the Foundation Formula, please consider that a formula that changes every year is not a formula that can be used for planning. And planning is very important when more is asked of education each year.

Last year's much appreciated increase in aid has had an unintended consequence here in Monroe County. Our county government saw the increased education aid and concluded that, since they had a persistent debt problem, they would claim for themselves sales tax revenues that are collected for the schools. The county's decision has forced the school districts to turn to the courts, creating the undesirable situation of the county's school districts suing the county government.

But there is also a political side to this issue and the school districts have become the focus of an aggressive media campaign that disparages the schools as greedy and spendthrift. 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 budget, 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. 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 you today. I will submit more detailed remarks by email.