Syracuse City School District

SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Written Testimony of Sharon L. Contreras, Superintendent
Syracuse City School District
New NY Education Reform Commission
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Good afternoon. My name is Sharon Contreras and I am Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District. I want to thank Chairman Parsons and members of the Commission for giving us the opportunity to provide input into this process.

When I accepted the superintendency one year ago, I did so knowing that the Syracuse community had reached a crisis point in terms of student achievement. However, it was also clear that the city possessed many unique assets, including a community committed to student success. We have adopted the Say Yes to Education model and proudly hold the designation as the first Say Yes to Education district in the nation. Say Yes has been a driving force in establishing partnerships and solidifying the commitment to accelerate achievement for the city's diverse student population.

While diversity is one of our community's strengths, it also presents a challenge when we consider the significant needs of many of our students. We serve more than 21,000 students who speak nearly 80 different languages. We have 1,400 Pre-K students, 1,600 English Language Learners and 2,100 refugees. Eighty-two percent of our students receive free or reduced lunch. Nearly one out of every five students receives special education services.

Syracuse is the second poorest of the Big 5 districts. We have been categorized by the State Education Department as a High Need Resource district. Our combined property and income wealth is less than one third that of the average New York State school district. The District's pupil demographics, coupled with its wealth measures, highlight our reliance on the State for adequate funding.

We are not asking that the state increase funding for education. Rather, we are asking that this funding be divided ***equitably*** among the districts to ensure that poor urban and rural students are given the same access to high-quality educational programs as their more affluent peers. For example, if the Gap Elimination Adjustment were to be applied to only the wealthier school districts, it would alleviate the unfair burden placed on high need, low wealth districts.

Repeated funding shortfalls create upheaval across districts, including program reductions and staff layoffs. Since 2008-09 Syracuse has eliminated more than 800 positions, or 20% of our workforce, and still we have essentially exhausted our fund balance.

Funding challenges have not kept us from embarking on our transformation work. However, it could keep us from fully implementing this critical work. In the past year, we have taken the findings of multiple district reviews and used them to complete a five year strategic plan. To improve student outcomes, we must develop comprehensive curricula and assessment frameworks that are aligned with the common core; develop and implement talent recruitment, support and retention systems; implement educator evaluation systems; and build and strengthen district infrastructure. These efforts will allow us to make data driven decisions and design innovative approaches to school reform. All of this work is consistent with the Regents Reform Agenda.

Syracuse is firmly committed to the State's efforts to improve student outcomes with the implementation of the common core state standards and APPR for teachers and principals. However, the costs to implement these initiatives are significant. Last year, Syracuse spent 1.2 million dollars on the rollout of the common core and 2 million dollars on the design and implementation of the APPR. We expect to spend another 9 million dollars on the common core initiative and 6 million dollars on APPR implementation in the coming year.

Syracuse is focusing spending on student achievement, while at the same time striving to become economically efficient. However, Syracuse and the other Big 5 districts can maximize resources to enact the Regents Reform Agenda by forming a consortium. This will allow us to capitalize on each district's strengths. Specializing in various aspects of curriculum, assessment, data systems, and evaluation frameworks means the Big 5 can design nuanced systems built for urban districts and can share products and practices. We support the establishment of a consortium of the Big 5 districts. This will lead to cost savings for the development of curricula and assessments that speak specifically to the needs of urban students. For example, under the current APPR regulations, Syracuse cannot use Rochester's assessments because they do not qualify for SCSD as either state approved third party or district developed assessments. As a result, we must spend nearly 500 thousand dollars to purchase assessments.

I would also recommend the following actions to create system efficiencies and improve services to students:

- Support for state requirements and systems that incorporate the tracking of interventions to determine which are having significant impact on student success
- Creation of a common application for school districts to apply for funding across state agencies
- Creation of statewide contracts for transportation, textbook adoption, and other areas, allocating the savings to the state and districts on a 50/50 basis

This commission has the opportunity to shape the future of public education in New York. We value your commitment and know you recognize the need for every child in our state to receive a high-quality education.