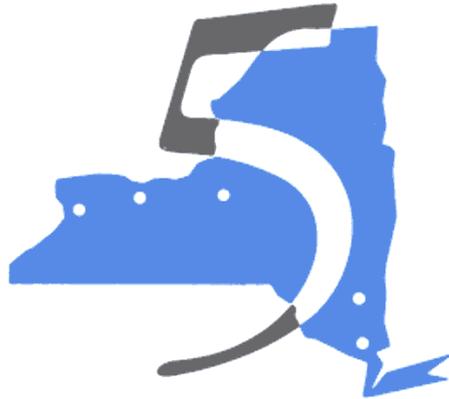


Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Testimony Before

The New NY Education

Reform Commission



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Executive Director

Good Afternoon, my name is Georgia Ascitutto, I am the Executive Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts, an organization representing the five large city school districts of New York State – Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers.

I want to thank Governor Cuomo, Chairman Parsons and all the members of the Commission for the opportunity to present data, information and recommendations to you today.

I thought it would be helpful to begin with an overview of the student demographics of the Big 5 school districts.

Big 5 School Districts – Overview

- Collectively, the Big 5 school districts enroll nearly 41% of New York State’s public school students;
- While we serve 41% of the K-12 overall population, we educate 74% of New York State’s English Language Learners and Limited English Proficient pupils;
- Almost two thirds of the State’s prekindergarten children are educated in the Big 5; and,
- Nearly 42% of the State’s school age special education students are educated in our schools.
- Our student poverty rates are staggering at: Buffalo-83%; New York City-78%; Rochester-89%; Syracuse-82% and Yonkers-65%. Student poverty, when coupled with districts’ ELL/LEP rates, indicate the Big 5 school districts are serving a disproportionately large number of pupils with extraordinary needs.

- Furthermore, the Big 5 school districts have high rates of student mobility, homelessness and students living in temporary 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.

District	Average Age of School Buildings	Total Number of School Buildings	Number of School Buildings Constructed In:				
			Pre-1900	1901-1920	1921-1939	1940-1969	1970-Present
Buffalo	78	71	3	12	35	16	5
New York City	65	1,115	56	154	297	359	249
Rochester	66	51	1	12	13	15	10
Syracuse	72	35	0	5	16	9	5
Yonkers	71	41	4	8	8	12	9

As of February, 2012.

Why is This Data Important?

As the only five fiscally dependent school districts in New York State, the Big 5 districts are, and continue to be, the only districts restrained from adopting budgets to accommodate their student needs.

While all other school districts in New York State now have a 2% property tax cap, unless otherwise authorized by their voters, the Big 5 school districts have been educating pupils with no local funding increases for years, with few exceptions. The attached chart provides a 14 year analysis of all revenue sources for each of the Big 5 school districts identified by local revenue including city tax levy and STAR funds, State revenue, county sales tax revenue, if applicable, federal funds and other sources.

While, the Big 5 cities have a statutory maintenance of effort requirement to provide a base level of local funding, the law merely sets a minimal local funding floor.

There is no requirement for our cities to provide additional local funds to support any additional educational costs associated with increased enrollment, extra support for at-risk pupils, contractual increases, cost of living adjustments or additional expenses for new State or federal requirements such as the Regents College and Career Readiness standards and implementation of the national common core curriculum, for example.

The fiscal dependency structure, coupled with a minimal maintenance of effort statute and the educational needs of at-risk pupils as well as those living in poverty, places an even greater responsibility on the State for equitable and adequate education funding for the Big 5 school systems.

Recommendations for Programmatic Support

In order to improve student achievement and ensure college and career readiness for all students, a multi-pronged approach must be adopted that promotes student success through specific initiatives designed to prevent future academic problems and provide meaningful intervention strategies where needed. In addition, the State must make a commitment to support innovative academic initiatives and mandate relief measures.

Prevention and Intervention Programs

Quality early childhood education is one of the most renowned education prevention programs with demonstrated long-term academic success particularly for children living in poverty.

The State must support full day school based Prekindergarten initiatives in high need urban districts. Additional funds for Pre-K programs, flexible use of Universal Pre-K dollars and Transportation Aid for Pre-K pupils are all critical components to delivering high quality early childhood programs in the Big 5.

This year Governor Cuomo signed into law two bills extending a mandatory kindergarten option to New York City and Rochester, with certain exceptions. These proposals were extensions of a Syracuse School District statute adopted 25 years ago to address a student attendance problem by allowing the Syracuse City School District to require children to attend kindergarten.

We are working with the Buffalo and Yonkers School Districts to determine if this statute would be helpful to their early childhood programs.

Student attendance is a vital component of educational success for all grades. Laws and policies set the foundation to require attendance, however, outreach efforts by school coordinators, social workers and school guidance counselors are the pupil support personnel needed to work with children and their families.

Funding for these vital programs has been compromised in recent years. The State must recognize and support these initiatives as vital components of quality educational services in urban school districts.

More time on task is one of the most important prevention and intervention strategies a school district can employ for educational success. It is evident that the 180-day school calendar is archaic, extremely limited and not competitive with global educational opportunities.

New York State should adopt a pilot program targeting at-risk pupils in high need districts for extended learning initiatives in before and after school programs, weekend academies, extended summer school and a longer school year, for example.

Access to health and mental health providers is another measure ensuring students are ready to learn. The Conference of Big 5 School Districts has called for the adoption of legislation to provide limited Building Aid reimbursement for the establishment of health and mental health clinics in our schools.

Assemblywoman Nolan and Senator Montgomery have taken the lead in this initiative and we thank them for their support to strengthen health and mental health services in our schools. We look forward to continuing to work together for the expansion of school-based health and mental health clinics and we seek the support of the Commission in these efforts.

We know that the public schools in many areas of our cities are the beacons of hope and opportunity for children to receive a quality education and become successful adults. This opportunity should be extended to families in need by expanding wrap around services at school sites for family literacy programs, parent engagement initiatives, social services and other programs with community partners.

Additional Academic Initiatives

We welcome the opportunity to have Commission members visit our schools and see first-hand some of the wonderful academic programs in place at all grade levels.

The Big 5 school districts have many successful programs that run the gamut from quality early education programs, Pre-K to Grade 8 schools, magnet schools, instructional technology

initiatives, International Baccalaureate schools, Montessori Academies, Early College High Schools and numerous career and technical programs, to name a few. Quality programs, however, require proper funding.

As we implement the components of the Regents reform agenda and build upon our successes, there are new costs that should be accounted for under State reimbursement. These include costs for new instructional materials aligned with the common core standards, implementation costs associated with the new principal and teacher evaluation system and additional expenses for professional development, for example.

As you look for streamlined approaches for academic initiatives and support services, please keep in mind that the Big 5 school districts are not component districts under BOCES. Therefore any program or service run by or through BOCES may not afford the Big 5 the same funding opportunities and/or savings as component school districts of BOCES.

There has been a longstanding parity issue regarding State reimbursement to school districts under BOCES Aid versus what the State reimburses the Big 5 school districts. For example, professional development is not funded by the State for the Big 5, however, the costs for a BOCES professional development program can be captured under BOCES Aid for component districts.

I would encourage a careful review and consideration of the impact on all school districts if a programmatic or administrative consolidation is advanced through BOCES.

One area where the Big 5 school districts are making an impact in saving money is by either placing or re-directing special education pupils into more appropriate and least restrictive public

settings. In some cases, this means keeping more special education pupils in general education classes or not placing them in private programs. In other cases this entails changing placements to less segregated public environments.

While we are trying to manage disproportionately large special education budgets, approximately 20% to 25% of school budgets for 12% to 15% of the overall student enrollments, the State could help by adopting reforms in preschool special education and mandate relief in school age special education.

I have attached our Big 5 Mandate Relief recommendations which include special education reforms that would not compromise programs or service delivery to students.

The State and Local Partnership

We support the emphasis on elevated learning standards, higher expectations for students, college and career readiness skills and the new Annual Professional Performance Reviews (APPR) for teachers and principals. These measures, however, come with costs. Some school districts are better able to support these initiatives than others. Our success will depend on the State's investment in our schools.

We share the legal and moral obligation to provide a quality education for our children. Yet, urban school districts have an even greater responsibility in providing children with the programs and services necessary for their success. We need the State to be our partners in this mission.

While there are fiscal constraints at every level of government, the State must be guided by the principles of leadership, partnership and public engagement in the delivery of education.

The public supports public education. The State must support the public by adequately funding school districts and afford all children in our cities and throughout our State an opportunity to learn.

Thank you for this opportunity. I stand ready to assist the Commission with any additional information you may require.