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Joint Legislative Hearing on the Executive Elementary and Secondary Education Budget

City School District of Albany 2024-25 Legislative Priorities

Presented by Superintendent Joseph Hochreiter

February 1, 2024

Now that the promise to fully fund Foundation Aid for all New York school districts is fulfilled, our state has entered a new era in school funding.

As a high-needs district that was significantly underfunded for years, we are thankful to be starting from this newly leveled playing field as we plan for the needs of our students, families and community.

And we arrived at this place just in time.

The unprecedented federal funding that school districts received in response to the COVID-19 pandemic helped sustain critical programs, services and staffing for our students and families. The federal government's support during this time of fiscal crisis and economic uncertainty was vital as we returned from the pandemic, and as we have continued the work to move beyond it.

With the last of that one-time federal funding set to expire in September, we are extremely grateful to the State of New York for fully funding Foundation Aid over the past three years. Your support steered us away from what could have been a very dangerous fiscal cliff, and we applaud you for that vision.

Now, as New York school districts move forward under our more traditional funding models, we ask you to maintain your critical focus on funding equity. We urge you to consider the unique needs of individual school districts and communities in making the difficult decisions that always are a part of the budget-development cycle. We know your decisions are not easy, yet we also know how critical your support is for our students, families and community.

With these needs in mind, the City School District of Albany has identified the following as our top priorities for this budget-development cycle:

Foundation Aid funding and Albany's unique needs

As I noted a moment ago, an enduring commitment to school funding equity, and to the unique challenges of individual school districts and communities, is critical for our future. This is especially true as we address significant and long-standing disparities in student outcomes that the pandemic has exacerbated.

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VISION STATEMENT

The City School District of Albany will be a district of excellence with caring relationships and engaging learning experiences that provide equitable opportunities for all students to reach their potential.

MISSION STATEMENT

We will work in partnership with our diverse community to engage every learner in a robust educational program designed to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for success.

For our school district, some of those unique fiscal challenges include:

- **63% of our city's property is tax-exempt**
 - This is due in large part to the role our city plays as the seat of state government. We appreciate the state's continued support of the City of Albany through Capital City Aid, and we ask that you also recognize this impact on the city's school district.
- **The oversaturation of charter schools in Albany is among the highest in the state and nation.**
 - Our annual charter school costs are nearing \$40 million and continuing to grow.
 - In addition to destabilizing a child's education, this oversaturation also burdens our taxpayers with redundant operational expenses that drive up the cost of publicly funded education in our city.
 - Moreover, our city's charter schools routinely enroll low percentages of students with disabilities and English-language learners. In doing so, they are failing to serve some of the most fragile children in our community.
- **We are experiencing significant growth in our ENL and refugee enrollment.**
 - Albany is one of 34 federally designated resettlement cities nationwide, a fact in which our city and our school district take great pride.
 - From July 1 through October 31 this school year, we welcomed 327 new English-language learners.
 - That's a 42% increase over the same period last school year, and an increase of more than 150% over the same four-month period in 2020.
 - ELLs now comprise nearly 15% of our total enrollment.

Equitable prekindergarten funding for high-needs urban school districts

Our school district continues to advocate for funding equity in prekindergarten. This is especially important for high-needs districts like ours, which were early implementers of full-day pre-K but remain hampered by an outdated pre-K funding formula.

Our overall per-pupil allocation remains less than \$7,000 while the state is awarding new pre-K funding up to \$10,000 per-pupil for new seats in other school districts.

Our district also invests more than a million dollars annually to supplement our pre-K funding -- \$1.3 million in the current year. We ask the state to provide us with the equitable fiscal support necessary to do support our youngest learners without having to compromise our K-12 programs.

Support for programs to expand and diversify New York's teaching workforce

The statistics for the future of the teaching profession in New York are stark and you know them well, especially as our population continues to grow in its diversity.

We applaud and support the meaningful steps Governor Hochul and the Legislature have taken to address these looming challenges. That includes the Empire State Teacher Residency Program that the governor announced last fall. This is supporting five teacher residencies in our school district, and we are grateful for that support.

We urge you to continue to develop measures such as these that will help break through barriers that make it difficult for school districts to create and sustain Grow Your Own programs.

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Support for social-emotional and mental health services

Finally, we ask for your continued commitment to the social-emotional and mental health supports that our students and families need. This is critical now more than ever following the loss and uncertainty of the pandemic.

In our internal and external community surveys to develop our American Rescue Plan funding priorities, our community consistently identified this as a top priority. Your continued support for social-emotional and mental health programs and staffing will allow us to do our part to build and support a healthy, successful community for our state's Capital City.