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School Administrators Association of New York State

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Testimony of the

School Administrators Association of New York State

Presented to the Assembly Ways and Means

And

State Finance Committees

Joint Hearing on the FY 2018-19

Executive Budget

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Albany, New York

Chairperson Young, Chairperson Weinstein, honorable members of the Legislature and distinguished staff, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding proposals contained in the Executive Budget for fiscal year 2018-19.

My name is Cynthia Gallagher and I serve as the Director of Government Relations for the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS). SAANYS is the largest state professional association of school administrators, with membership exceeding 7,000 school leaders. Over 429 districts are represented by our association; from the tip of Long Island to the most western, southern and northern parts of our state. Additionally, SAANYS and the New York State Federation of School Administrators (NYSFSA) have a longstanding coalition, titled the New York State Supervisors and Administrators Consortium (NYSSAC) to collaborate on advocacy and professional learning opportunities. On behalf of the principals, assistant principals, supervisors, directors, deans and many other professional titles in our association, I want to thank you for your continued time, commitment, and support of public education.

The school leaders in our state are unremitting in their commitment to provide high quality programs and services to meet the needs of students and their surrounding communities. School effectiveness and improvement research shows that building level administrators play key roles in ensuring the vitality and growth of schools. The work of our administrators is complex and nuanced. The role of a school leader is unlike any other in the district. Our school leaders must be responsive to every stakeholder group. Everyday their job requires them to respond to the needs of students, teachers, support staff, parents, community members, superintendents, and

board members. Adding to this complexity is the impact of education policy, local and state politics, and the economy. State and federal reforms that become building level initiatives, rest on the shoulders of our school leaders who are held accountable for their success.

School leaders are asked to assume those responsibilities in highly dynamic and oftentimes insufficiently resourced environments. How our schools are judged and rated is based in large part on the effectiveness of our school leaders. This testimony examines the proposed budget through the lens of school administrators by looking at what is included, and maybe more importantly, looking beyond the budget to what is still needed.

SCHOOL AID

We would like to start with our appreciation for retaining the foundation formula. Retention of a mechanism that frames and delineates a process for determining district funding is critical. A stable formula and corresponding funding, allows districts to understand the moving pieces of their allocations and project possible funding scenarios in subsequent years. It is with a sigh of relief that we do not start off this budget cycle contesting the need for a state aid formula.

The context of setting an educational budget in a depressed and volatile fiscal environment is extremely challenging work. While some business sectors thrive, educational enterprises remain vulnerable. The needs of students and their families are far outpacing the revenues dedicated to school districts. The Governor's budget allocates over 80% of foundation aid to the neediest school districts, but the neediest students and families live in every part of this state - not just the high need districts. No district is immune to the increasing number of families living below sustainable income levels needed to meet minimal daily expenses. While marginal increases to the education portion of the budget are appreciated, the levels remain insufficient for

doing the work schools are called on to do. The demands for expanded programming and the creation of schools that buffer students from external pressures exponentially increase annually.

I will use a recent conversation with principals from across the state to frame the concerns SAANYS has in regard to the proposed budget. When asked about their initial responses to the Executive Budget the following statements capsule the concerns articulated:

-Our district is tapped out as far as going back to taxpayers with an increase - we will not be able to address this year's budget with any thought of a tax increase, whether it be .05%, 1%, 1.2% or 1.9% ,

-We would like to go out to our community partners to supplement our programs with their staff of social workers or mental health clinicians-except they too do not have adequate resources,

-Our district is anticipating the new federal requirements under ESSA and any thought of using fund balances for any kind of program expansion is not realistic,

-Competitive grants do not help our district. I can demonstrate need and have data point after data point, but we cannot compete with the eligibility criteria that focus on districts labeled as High Need, and

-As the state moves to computer based testing, we need to build a technology infrastructure to support the assessment program.

Based on a year of extensive travel across the state and input from our members, I would like to address the following aspects of the proposed budget:

Foundation Aid – An increase of \$337.6 million, of which \$50 million is designated for Community Schools, reduces the proposed foundation aid to \$287 million. This increase is

approximately 1.97% over last year's budget. This is not a level at which districts can sustain current programming. SAANYS, as a member of the Educational Conference Board (ECB), carefully constructed a projected needed increase of 2.80% just to retain last year's programming due to increased costs of insurance, salaries, and Teacher Retirement System contributions. As indicated in the comments from our members, the need to adapt to the rising needs of students is costly. Additional personnel are desperately needed to address the 60% of youth with depressions and the 80% of youth with anxiety disorders who are not currently receiving services (Child Mind Institute). Additional support is also needed to serve the ever increasing numbers of students with multi-language needs and to expand career and technical education programs.

When student performance suffers due to pressures outside of the school, schools are pressed upon to provide more intensive support services, add academic supports, and increase after school programs. These types of services are just what Community Schools are funded to do yet, so many of our schools are not designated Community Schools and receive no additional funding to meet these expectations.

Expense based aid – SAANYS holds a similar position on expense-based aids. The costs of special education and transportation are continually increasing. Preschool education costs are not only increasing, but the provision of such services are falling more and more on districts. Districts find themselves scrambling to provide services as approved private preschool special education providers are closing or eliminating services for a wide range of issues. In addition, districts are more frequently conducting comprehensive evaluations as agencies that provided such services no longer do so due to inadequate rate reimbursement. Such evaluations must be conducted by appropriately trained staff, which requires funding, which districts have not received. Although each of the expense-based aids look like a different funding source on a

budget run, to a district it looks like increasing numbers of students needing intensive services, for which sufficient funding has not be forthcoming.

The basic operation aid supports must be increased by least 2.8% to enable school districts to provide expected services.

COMPETITIVE GRANTS/INCENTIVES

Competitive grants and incentivized funding serve a purpose, which is to direct aid to specific programs. But competitive grants have a limited purpose and shelf life and should not be used as a permanent funding stream. They have also been punitive to districts without sufficient resources to write grants or that do not fit narrow eligibility criteria. If the targeted program has demonstrated sufficient impact or success, it is logical that such programs should be made available to all districts. Therefore, SAANYS would recommend that parameters for competitive grants be reexamined to restrict their longevity so as increase availability to more districts with demonstrated needs. Competitive grants had their impetus as program catalysts, not program sustainment. In a fiscal environment as depressing as the one facing districts this year, funding should be reallocated to state aid formulas so as to be used for locally determined needs.

The sustainability of prekindergarten and kindergarten need a revised funding approach. The two most researched and effective interventions are on a shaky foundation. The fiscal support for prekindergarten has been achieved through seven distinct grants and statewide full day kindergarten is attempting to be achieved through incentivized conversion aid. Even if districts take advantage of this opportunity, the students remain counted as half day students for purposes of reimbursement. Both of these strategies have outlived their shelf life and need to be embedded fully into the 21st century education continuum. Prekindergarten and full day kindergarten is important for industries looking to locate in New York. Industries needing to

attract young families look specifically to districts with these programs. So many European countries have far more progressive early care and education than we have in New York. Fully funded and sustainable prekindergarten and kindergarten programs are within reach at this point in time and it is time.

Lastly, the grants program listed in the proposed budget are worthy of support, but there is one group of beneficiaries omitted from the list of grants - school administrators. The implementation of recent reform initiatives, whether it be APPR, VADIR, new assessment rollouts, or new curricular standards are added to the already all-encompassing responsibilities of our administrators. They have embraced these new initiatives without drama or protestation yet, as we go down the list of available grants (Master Teacher Program, Excellence in Teaching Awards, Teachers of Tomorrow, and Teacher Mentor Program) there has been little recognition of the need to provide support to our administrators. We respectfully request a separate grant program be established to support school administrators, which would include funding professional learning opportunities in the areas of new curricular standards, strategies for meeting student mental health needs, administrative mentoring and collaborating with community partners.

Building level reporting

A key proposal in the Executive Budget, which is also reflected in the recently approved ESSA State Plan, is the required building-level expense reporting for federal, state, and local funding sources. We understand the premise upon which these new mandates rest; however, SAANYS does not support the onerous approach taken in the Executive proposal. The proposed strategy to withhold state aid until the New York State Education Department approves of the plan

submitted by the district is not warranted. This strategy is similar to reform measures used for APPR and NCLB which did not work, or produce expected results. We have learned much over the past five years regarding reform strategies, and the primary lesson is that often, blunt policies are not effective for the complex nature of schools, and the students and communities they serve. We have more precise strategies that are far more effective than the threat of withholding funding. How can that possibly be a successful strategy? It is like having a leaky faucet and turning off the water and declaring that the problem is fixed. We need to use the correct tools for the correct problem. And we have those tools. The premise behind this initiative is that districts are not providing the necessary allocations to underperforming schools. That premise is an assumption based on mega- level concepts. Let's apply what we know from past failures and start off in a more effective way. If the fiscal climate is what we all anticipate then we do not have the resources to implement a statewide approach which may not be a statewide problem. Neither NYSED nor districts can waste resources on a broad, imprecise policy. In the case of building level reporting, let's begin the process of collecting data. Allow NYSED to build a database on which the analysis can begin. Then using the data, address the problem where it exists. After reviewing district and building-level data construct comprehensive strategies to work with school districts needing support and redirection. Only after undertaking such efforts will we know if more strident sanctions are needed.

The Governor's proposal also included language that would allow the Division of Budget to unilaterally reduce budget amounts available for payment should there be a receipt shortfall. We would strongly urge the Legislature to maintain their voice in the budget process in such a scenario.

Lastly, in order to provide our districts with the correct tools, an updated education funding formula is needed. In 2007 we were on the right path by setting up formulaic components and setting the formula within the context of researched-based costs for providing successful academic programs. However, this formula is now 11 years old and, modifications, suspensions, or other permutations have resulted in an outdated and less than transparent mechanism. The formula needs to be reexamined through the lens of today's environment - the one that is faced daily by districts and students. The weighting of high-needs students, changing district capacities, the increasing costs of preschool special education in a dwindling private sector, and changing demographics, needs to be reexamined to project our state to forward looking methodologies.

Summary

School leaders across the state are industrious and tenacious. They have risen to meet every challenge presented to them - whether it be constantly shifting mandates or increasing student needs. They continue to need your support through the provision of funding that will assist them in their important work, rather than placing constraints on them. We are asking for a \$2 billion in increase state aid over last year's level and targeted funding to support intensive professional learning for currently practicing school leaders.