



City School District of Albany Advocating for Equity and Guidance During the COVID-19 Fiscal Crisis

While we are beginning the budget-development process for the 2021-22 school year, our foremost concern at this time is on our current fiscal year. The news from the New York State Division of Budget in August that, absent the federal aid that still has not been delivered, the state would withhold 20% of its aid to schools, was devastating for our high-needs school district. We made the fiscally prudent decision to act at that time in order to avoid the potential for significantly deeper cuts – and even more significant programmatic impact – later in the school year. We made the painful decision to eliminate 215.6 positions in September. That equaled about \$15 million in budget reductions, or about 13% of our total anticipated state aid for the 2020-21 school year.

We continue to take a pragmatic approach and realize that the economic realities of the pandemic will mean that state aid reductions at some point this school year are likely. We also recognize that the fiscal impact of COVID-19 will extend over multiple years. We are buoyed by November's forecast from the Office of the State Comptroller that indicates that the state's tax revenues in current and future years may decline less than previously anticipated, with a projection of a 5.6% decrease for the state's current fiscal year. We anxiously await Governor Cuomo's planned lookback at the end of December for further guidance that will be critical for our planning, and also hope that changing leadership at the national level will translate into the fiscal support that states and schools need and deserve.

Equity to support high-needs school districts

If state aid reductions of any proportion become necessary during the 2020-21 fiscal year, we continue to urge the state to implement them through an equity lens. The governor has been a champion in this area, advocating for real change that would address inequities that exist for communities of color throughout New York. We need his leadership now more than ever as the pandemic continues to threaten the health and well-being of all New Yorkers, and especially our most vulnerable populations.

As you know, New York's high-needs school districts, like Albany, are significantly more reliant on state aid than our wealthier neighbors. Our school district receives approximately 45% of our total revenue through state aid. A reduction of 20% across all of our aid categories would equal \$23.2 million, or more than \$2,100 per student. For a school district in which 80% of our students are students of color and 60% of our students are economically disadvantaged, this reduction would be devastating.

A flat reduction of any percentage for all school districts statewide also would deepen the disparities that exist between districts that already are separated by the socioeconomic realities of the communities they serve. We ask that any state aid reductions that become necessary, in the current or subsequent fiscal years, are implemented equitably with these disparate needs in mind.

(more)

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.

Equity in public vs. charter aid reductions

We also ask that any reductions that are necessary are implemented fairly between public schools and charter schools. Our district sends approximately \$35 million annually to the city's charter schools – more than 13% of our total budget. We already have made half of those payments in the current fiscal year.

We understand that these difficult times will require sacrifices and choices none of us would make under normal circumstances. However, we would be dismayed if the state's school aid reductions for public districts did not also apply equally to the charters. The impact of such a decision would be hugely inequitable for the students and families we serve – who comprise nearly 85% of the students attending publicly funded schools in Albany.

Awaiting critical information

Finally, we ask for guidance as soon as it can be provided.

While we appreciate the uncertain circumstances the state is facing, we have operated for more than a quarter of our current fiscal year under the cloud of potential reductions to our state aid – reductions that could total more than \$23 million if the state does implement 20% reductions in all of our aid categories. Based on that information, as noted above we made the painful yet prudent decision in September to reduce our 2020-21 budget and staffing.

The programmatic impact on our students and families was significant. These reductions required that we move all of our general education students in grades 7-12 to a fully virtual instructional model, rather than the hybrid models we had designed during the summer. We also dramatically restructured stand-alone programs that serve our most at-risk students – students in grades 7-12 who benefit from additional social-emotional supports in the smaller alternative setting of our Tony Clement Center for Education, and refugee and immigrant students in grades 6-12 who benefit from the additional language support and wraparound services at our Albany International Center.

We also have planned for a 20% reduction in our Community Schools allocation for 2020-21 based on the guidance of a potential 20% state aid reduction, and are awaiting critical decisions regarding the timing of state grant approvals, and when the release of the initial 20% will be received. These decisions could have a significant impact on our overall financial position for 2020-21 – and our ability to deliver the high-quality programs our students need and deserve.

We recognize that the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis will be deep and lasting for our students and their families. Without equitable relief in the areas we have outlined above, we fear that we will be forced to cut deeper still. With the hard limits on class sizes required by the need for social distancing due the continuing health and safety concerns about COVID-19, if the budget reductions we have made to date are not sufficient we have few options remaining except moving more students to a fully virtual model. We all recognize that this is not in students' best interests.

We need to begin to restore these programs and opportunities for our students as soon as possible. To do that responsibly, we need clarification about how much aid we will have not only for the current year, but also for 2021-22. We need to be able to look forward with confidence that we will be able to sustain a level of programming that will minimize, to the greatest extent possible, the potential for our students to fall further behind their peers in other communities across New York.