

## **City School District of Albany 2024-25 Legislative Priorities**

### **The Future of School Funding in New York and Albany's Unique Challenges**

Its promise to fully fund Foundation Aid for all public school districts fulfilled, New York has entered a new era in school funding as we look to the 2024-25 school year and beyond. As a high-needs district that was significantly underfunded for years due to the state's school funding inequities, we are grateful to be starting from this newly leveled playing field as we plan for the future needs of our students, families and community.

As recently as the 2020-21 school year, our district received only 75% of our Foundation Aid – an annual shortfall of more than \$26 million. At that time, state aid supported only 45% of our annual budget, and our school district received the lowest amount of state aid per student among a large group of similar districts that included the Upstate members of the Big 5 as well as small-city districts such as Newburgh, Poughkeepsie, Schenectady, Troy and Utica. With the state's fulfillment of its promise to fully fund Foundation Aid, state aid now supports 52% of our budget in the current school year. This represents significant progress for our students, and for our taxpayers as well.

However, the added support of the one-time federal pandemic relief funds is set to go away in the months ahead. An enduring commitment from the state to school funding equity will be especially critical for urban districts like ours as we continue to address significant and long-standing disparities in student outcomes that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated. We urge the state to focus on assessing and meeting the unique needs of individual school districts and communities in planning for future education funding so that we can assure that, when they walk through our doors, every student has the resources and support they need to succeed, irrespective of the broader and complex challenges that their community may face.

#### **Albany's unique challenges and needs**

The state's welcome commitment to fully funding Foundation Aid over the past three years has stabilized our school district's fiscal circumstances as we plan for the end of our one-time federal COVID-19 relief funding. However, even though our long-standing shortfall in Foundation Aid funding has been addressed, our district and our community remain challenged in other unique ways that result in part from our city's role as host to state government:

- 63% of our city's property is tax-exempt, leaving remaining properties to bear a high tax burden. We appreciate the state's continued support of the City of Albany through the Capital City Aid, and ask that the state also recognize the impact on the city's school district.

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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.*

- In part because we are host to state government, we have been a center of charter school activity. This has resulted in an oversaturation of charter schools in Albany – the percentage of charter students in our city is among the highest in the state and nation. As a result, our annual charter school costs are nearing \$40 million annually and continue to grow.

Despite this, and despite our low state-aid ratio for many years, our school district has held the line on property taxes. Over the last 10 years we have had an average tax-levy increase of less than 1% annually (0.9%), including zero increase for the current school year as well as two previous years during the last decade. Nonetheless, Albany’s property taxes continue to be higher than suburban communities in our region. We need the state’s continued assistance to equitably fund the education our students need and deserve while keeping our tax burden reasonable.

### **Other unique factors that impact Albany**

Additional unique factors that present both fiscal and programmatic challenges are:

- **ENL growth** – Albany is one of 34 federally designated resettlement cities nationwide, a fact in which our city and our school district take great pride. Our school district’s population of ENL students more than tripled from 2012-17. While that growth slowed for several years due to the federal government’s immigration policies from 2017-20, the leadership changes under the Biden administration have resulted in a renewed increase in refugee and immigrant families moving to Albany. From July through October, we welcomed 327 new English-language learners, an increase of 42% over last year and 48% over the same period in 2021. That also represents an increase of 153% over the same period in 2020. ENL students currently comprise about 15% of our enrollment, and further growth is anticipated.
- **Overall enrollment growth** – Our school district was among the state’s fastest-growing school districts in New York from 2012-17. During that period, our enrollment grew by 16%, or approximately 1,300 students. That growth leveled off and declined for several school years, particularly due to stricter immigration policies and the impact of COVID-19. However, that trend has begun to reverse following changes to immigration policies under the Biden administration and the easing of public health concerns related to COVID-19. Our enrollment at the end of October (8,750) represented a 1.3% increase over the 2022-23 school year (110 students). We anticipate this trend will continue in future years, based primarily on the factors noted above.
- **Impact of COVID-19, justice reforms** – The social-emotional and mental health impacts of the pandemic have been severe throughout society. In cities nationally and statewide, families have been disrupted by health and economic hardships, and beset by isolation and loss. Violent crime statistics soared during the pandemic. This increased the pressure on city school districts in New York to provide additional academic, social-emotional and mental health supports due to unintended consequences of the state’s justice-related reforms. These reforms have been the right thing to do, and our district fully supports them. However, even before the pandemic they left districts like ours lacking the resources to support 16- and 17-year-olds who would previously have been adjudicated as adults and now are being supervised in the community and continuing to attend school. While we fully support these reforms, including raising the age of criminal responsibility to 18, we urge the state to provide additional funding for the critical supports teen-agers need – especially as we continue the difficult process of building back from a pandemic that greatly magnified the need for these supports.