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City School District of Albany 2024-25 Legislative Priorities

Support for Social-Emotional and Mental Health Services for Students and Families

Supporting social-emotional and mental health needs has long been a priority for the City School District of Albany. It is critical now more than ever as we continue to build back from the significant challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, with all of the added stressors that the pandemic created for students and families. Anxiety and depression over financial instability, health risks, social isolation and loss of opportunities have compounded the stress teens and families already encounter, especially in communities like Albany where the impacts of poverty are pervasive and often severe.

Our district has continued to plan annually for expanding these critical services, including through our community engagement to develop funding priorities for our one-time federal pandemic relief funds. In our American Rescue Plan community surveys, respondents consistently have identified social-emotional and mental health needs among their top priorities. Our ARP investments for the 2023-24 school year have reflected that feedback. However, once these one-time federal funds are gone in the months ahead, our district, and communities statewide, will require permanent funding to be able to sustain these vital services and supports.

We applaud Governor Hochul's efforts to overhaul New York's continuum of mental health care and address the mental health needs of our state's young people, including investments in the current school year to expand mental health services for school-aged children, implement wraparound services training, support new and existing school-based health centers, and strengthen suicide prevention programs for young people. We urge the state to continue to build on these investments as we look to the 2024-25 school year and beyond. We need to expand preventative strategies such as restorative practices, social-emotional learning curriculum support, trauma-informed practices and school-based behavioral health clinics.

In addition to the pandemic, the state's recent juvenile justice reforms – which our district fully supports – also have come with unintended consequences. This also will continue to require additional resources if we are to be able to adequately meet the needs of students experiencing trauma and barriers that challenge their abilities in achieving success.

While 2023 crime statistics nationally and in Albany have shown declining trends following the unsettling spikes during the peak years of the pandemic, including a 6% decrease in overall criminal activity in Albany through October, violent crime remains an all-too-familiar reality for

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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.

young people in our city. Albany experienced 17 homicides through October of this year, nearing the tragic statistics of 2022 and 2021 (19 and 18, respectively). Moreover, the city reports that more than 85% of the homicides in 2023 have involved an individual with a family connection or domestic relationship with the victim, or were committed by a person who knew the victim.

In our school district, student behaviors continue to improve since our first full return to in-person learning in the fall of 2021. Our entire school community has continued to realign to responsibilities and expectations that were in place prior to the pandemic. However, students continue to report that they feel unsafe enroute to and from school, both walking and riding buses, and we continue to experience student altercations spilling over from the community as well as the confiscation of weapons in and near our school buildings.

Our employees, our community partners, and our students and families need additional social-emotional and mental health services, and the support to provide and sustain those services so we can do our part to build and support a healthy, successful community. Our district will continue to invest in these supports, and we ask the state for targeted resources in these areas as well.

For 2024-25, we are proposing an expansion of our alternative programming for students in grades 9-12. Our current alternative programs are located at the Tony Clement Center for Education, providing students in grades 7-12 with a smaller school and class sizes, and additional wraparound services to support their social-emotional-behavioral learning.

We are proposing an additional alternative pathway that would offer students who did not successfully complete eighth grade a more supportive learning environment in which to get back on track academically prior to moving on to high school. This program would focus on an eighth-grade curriculum during the first marking period, and transition to a ninth-grade curriculum for the rest of the school year. We strongly believe this would help set up more students for high school success.

To support this new alternative option for our students, we request \$500,000 to support four new teachers, a new school counselor and a new social worker specifically assigned to support this program.

Additionally, we are requesting \$350,000 to support four new school counselors to reduce the caseload for our current counselors and allow them to provide more support to our middle school and high school students.