



2024-25 Legislative Priorities

November 2023

Moving beyond the pandemic, moving forward for our students

Beginning in January 2021, the federal government acted swiftly to provide unprecedented levels of direct relief to schools nationwide to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The City School District of Albany will receive a total of \$46.7 million in one-time federal funds through September 2024 to support operations during, and recovery from, this worldwide public health crisis. These one-time federal funds were especially critical for our school district due to a significant shortfall in our annual Foundation Aid when the pandemic began. They continue to be vital as we build back from the pandemic, helping us supplement and sustain investments we have made over the past decade to support our students' academic and social-emotional growth.

These investments have been reflected in Albany High School's increasing graduation rate and the narrowing of the achievement gap between African-American students and White students, as this data comparing our Class of 2022 with the Class of 2020 illustrates:

- Overall graduation – 82% (+9%)
- African-American students – 83% (+13%)
- White students – 87% (+8%)
- Achievement gap – 4% (-5%)

The State of New York also has been responsive to the fiscal needs of school districts since the start of the pandemic, and we are grateful for the state's particular focus on fully funding the Foundation Aid formula over the past three years. For our district, the fulfillment of that promise closed an annual funding shortfall of more than \$26 million. However, with one-time federal COVID-19 funds set to expire in the months ahead, school districts once again will rely primarily on the state to support the academic and social-emotional needs of our students – who continue to be affected by the impact of the pandemic – and to mitigate the fiscal burden on local taxpayers.

With these critical fiscal needs in mind, we ask Governor Hochul and the State Legislature to maintain the strong commitment to fiscal equity demonstrated in recent years as they plan for the future of school funding for our state. We also urge our state leaders to consider the unique needs of individual school districts and communities in making the difficult decisions that always are a part of the annual budget-development cycle as we look ahead to the 2024-25 school year and beyond.

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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.

With these needs in mind, our top priorities for the 2024-25 budget-development cycle are:

Foundation Aid funding and Albany's unique needs

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 Upstate districts. The state's fulfillment of its promise to fully fund Foundation Aid now has eliminated that significant annual funding gap for our district, and state aid now supports 52% of our budget for the 2023-24 school year.

New York now has entered a new era in school funding. 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. However, an enduring commitment from the state to school funding equity and the unique challenges of individual school districts and communities will be especially critical as we look continue to address significant and long-standing disparities in student outcomes that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated. For our school district, those unique fiscal challenges include:

- **63% of our city's property is tax-exempt**
- **Charter school oversaturation** – Costs continue to grow and are nearing \$40 million annually
- **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-Oct. 31 this year, our school district welcomed 327 new ENL students – 42% more than the same period in 2022, and 153% more than the same period in 2020. ENL students now comprise nearly 15% of our total student enrollment.

Equitable prekindergarten funding for high-needs urban school districts

Our school district continues to ask the state to update its funding formula for prekindergarten, so that high-needs districts like Albany, which were early implementers of full-day pre-K, are treated equitably as New York expands its investments in this critical component of early childhood development. More than half of our pre-K seats are funded at an old UPK half-day base allocation. Because so many of our pre-K seats are funded under an outdated formula, our school district invests approximately \$1 million annually from our local budget. Even with that additional investment we see significant turnover in our pre-K staff, which is impacting our ability to provide the programming we believe our community needs and deserves. We strongly advocate raising pre-K funding for school districts that were early implementers of full-day pre-K to be in alignment with more recent funding streams. This would provide equity for districts like ours, allowing us to attract and retain high-quality, certified pre-K teachers so that students receive an even stronger foundation as they begin their academic journey.

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, 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 significant challenges. That includes the Empire State Teacher Residency Program funding the governor announced in September, which will support five teacher residencies in our school district. This is an important first step for us in our efforts to sustain and diversify our teaching workforce. We urge our state leaders to continue to develop and support additional measures that will expand access and break through barriers that residents and employees of high-needs school districts often encounter as they consider careers in teaching.

Support for social-emotional and mental health services

Our school district also is grateful for the state's continued commitment to providing the social-

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emotional and mental health supports that students and families need and deserve. Supporting social-emotional and mental health remains critical now more than ever following the added stressors the pandemic created throughout society. In our internal and external community surveys last year to develop our American Rescue Plan funding priorities, stakeholders identified this area as their top priority. The state's acknowledgement of and support for these priorities is most welcome. Students and families need additional social-emotional and mental health services, and our district needs the support to sustain and expand those services so we can do our part to build and support a healthy, successful community. The state's support will be especially critical in 2024-25 and beyond as school districts' federal pandemic relief funds expire.

Charter school oversaturation

Albany is one of the most oversaturated cities in the United States when it comes to charter schools. While our school district values and encourages parental choice in a child's education, the negative impact of this oversaturation is significant. Fiscally, our district anticipates sending nearly \$40 million to charter schools in the 2023-24 school year. This burden continues to grow and diminishes our ability to provide high-quality programs and services for the nearly 80% of students who attend our city's public schools. Moreover, Albany charter schools routinely enroll significantly lower percentages of students with disabilities and English-language learners than our school district, failing to serve some of the most academically fragile children in our community.

We strongly urge the state to close the "significant educational benefit" loophole in the state law, and require local boards of education to approve new charter applications when charter enrollment in that community exceeds the 5% limit already included in the law. We also urge the state to demand that charter schools enroll students with disabilities and English-language learners in percentages that are in line with those of the local public school district, and to update its charter school law to create a hard cap on the approval of new charter applications when the percentage of students in a community attending charter schools reaches 15%.

Additional priorities

Our district also supports the following positions for the 2024-25 cycle:

- **Early voting for school districts** – We support legislation that would provide New York school districts the option of offering early voting in the annual school budget vote and Board of Education election, consistent with early voting allowed in non-school-district elections statewide.
- **Receivership revisions** – We support legislation that would revise New York's school receivership law to remove punitive consequences and provide a more supportive, equitable system for assisting schools and school districts in need of improvement.
- **Consolidation of reimbursement aid categories** – The previous state administration advocated for the consolidation of multiple expense-based aids, including transportation, special education, BOCES and instructional material aids, into a single new Services Aid category. The growth of reimbursement no longer would be tied to actual expenditures, but would instead be capped annually based on district enrollment and inflation. We have strongly opposed this proposal, and continue to advocate against consolidating expense-driven aids.