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April 9, 2008

For Immediate Release

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**CFE & AQE REACTION TO RECORD SCHOOL AID INCREASE:
EQUITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY MAINTAINED
ASSEMBLY AND GOVERNOR PROVIDE THE LEADERSHIP**

**SENATE MAJORITY MAKES TAXPAYERS ADD OVER \$100 MILLION IN
POLITICALLY-DRIVEN “SHARES” FUNDING**

The 2008-2009 education budget enacts a record \$1.75 billion increase in funding for public education; the key issue delaying the education budget was not how much money would be spent but how it would be distributed across the state. \$1.2 billion of the \$1.75 billion is distributed through the foundation formula that was enacted last year to take the politics out of school aid and distribute basic classroom operating aid based upon student need. However, more than \$100 million was added to this budget at the insistence of the State Senate Majority in order to accommodate the demands of the Long Island Senate delegation for so-called Long Island “shares”— a politically pre-determined division of aid based upon geography, not student need.

“The \$1.75 billion school aid agreement shaped by Speaker Silver and Governor Paterson is historic because it keeps their promise to deliver the second of the four-year commitment to resolve the CFE lawsuit,” said Geri Palast, Executive Director, Campaign for Fiscal Equity. “It will ultimately provide a sound basic education to all public school students by driving the majority of funds through a formula based on need, subject to accountability through the Contract for Excellence with a strong public voice.”

“The record school aid increase is remarkable, but more important is that two thirds of the new funds are distributed fairly and equitably based upon student need thus maintaining the promise that was enacted into law last year,” said Billy Easton, Executive Director, Alliance for Quality Education. “Make no doubt about it, the State Assembly dug in their heels to deliver fairness and equity in education funding throughout the state and Governor Paterson stood with them. Meanwhile the state Senate Majority used all their chits to drive a boatload of money to politically well-healed downstate suburban districts. Sadly many upstate Senators barely lifted a finger to add additional foundation aid for their own districts.”

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Today's education budget represents year two of a four-year commitment to fundamentally transform the quality of education in New York State. Last year, after 14 years of lawsuits and public demand for educational opportunities for every child the state committed to a four year \$5.5 billion increase in basic classroom operating aid, also called foundation aid, to be distributed fairly in order to promote educational equity. Only one year later the commitment to educate every child was threatened, first by Governor Spitzer's budget that proposed to reduce this year's promised increase by \$350 million. Subsequently, the State Senate Majority budget also proposed to under fund the promised foundation aid increases for upstate districts and New York City while adding \$140 million in new aid primarily targeted to Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Meanwhile the State Assembly budget proposed to restore \$300 million in foundation aid for districts upstate and downstate while rejecting the extra aid to fund Long Island "shares." The budget enacted today melds much of the approaches of the Assembly and Senate Majorities with the foundation aid promised for New York City being delivered by the Assembly and the Governor and the Senate Majority securing its priority of added aid for downstate suburban districts. However, the Senate Majority did not agree to the foundation aid increases for upstate communities proposed by the Assembly, opting instead to prioritize funding for downstate suburban districts.

The Assembly and the Governor preserved the Contracts for Excellence as the central accountability tool, made the contracts cumulative to retain the full investment within the accountability structure, and modified the contracts to create a multi-tiered approach that permits some flexibility to reflect varying needs of school districts. Programs designed to serve English Language Learners were added to the best practices menu within the Contracts for Excellence which already included: class size reduction, teacher and principal quality initiatives, additional instructional time for students, high school and middle school restructuring, and expansion of half-day kindergarten and pre-kindergarten programs to full-day.

"We will need to examine these changes to the Contract for Excellence; however, we are pleased that the Assembly and the Governor fended off efforts to dismantle the new accountability system. Parents and education advocates have shown that, working with our elected leaders, we can make sustained gains in providing the constitutional right to a sound basic education to every public school child forged through 15 years of litigation and legislative action," said Geri D. Palast, of CFE.

"The Contract for Excellence was reaffirmed and even improved in some ways," said Billy Easton, of AQE, "but school districts were lobbying to replace accountability with flexibility, hopefully, this year's legislation did not go too far in the direction of flexibility. The proof will come when we see if school districts invest the money in best practices and improve student achievement."

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