



Alliance for Quality Education
Testimony to the Joint Senate Finance Committees and Assembly Ways and Means
January 29, 2013
Billy Easton, Executive Director

Good day. My name is Billy Easton. I am the executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify. AQE has been a leading voice of parents, students, teachers, and community activists who have witnessed their schools facing fiscal and educational crisis.

Before I address the overall issues of state aid, I want to commend the Governor for proposing a \$25 million investment for implementing full-day prekindergarten for the first time in New York State history. This funding will allow school districts to either create full day slots or expand their half day slots to full day. The program will build on the quality structures of the UPK program that was created by the legislature under the leadership of Speaker Sheldon Silver. We urge all the members of the legislature to support this program and include it in the final budget.

I am here to ask the question that Atraeu Richardson, a fifth grader from Buffalo, asked all of you when he spoke at a rally in Albany in December, "Will you fund our schools?"

Will you help our state get back on the path that all of you put us on with the statewide settlement of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity? Will you fund our schools so they have the capacity to provide a sound basic education to every student? If you do not, make no doubt about it our schools are headed on a downward spiral where every year they will continue to make more and more classroom cuts.

Unfortunately the funding level proposed in the Executive Budget is not enough to prevent yet another round of classroom cuts. Unless, the legislature adds funding to this budget, our schools will have to make more classroom cuts—for the fourth straight year.

Legislation passed in recent years has created a hole in education funding which cannot be addressed by local property taxpayers. The state aid cap, which ties growth in education funding to personal income growth, limits increases in state education funding to only three or four percent. While the property tax cap has exacerbated the problems, in many communities

local taxpayers cannot afford higher property taxes anyway which is why the inadequate state aid is by far the biggest problem facing our schools. Inadequate state aid combined with the \$2.7 billion in cuts that were made in recent years have taken our state backwards educationally, not forward.

The Campaign for Fiscal Equity promise has been broken. According to the New York State Board of Regents the shortfall in foundation aid now tops \$5.5 billion dollars.¹ Current school funding is below 2008-09 levels.

This year, the school aid runs contain a 3% year over year increase, but the Executive Budget proposes a 4.4% year over year increase for a total of \$889 million. One of the unique features in this year's proposed budget is the \$203 million in Fiscal Stabilization Funds. The fact that we need Fiscal Stabilization Funds is because our schools have been destabilized by cuts and caps enacted in Albany. The Fiscal Stabilization Funds are unallocated in the Executive Budget. Some would say that all the legislature needs to do is jockey over how these funds are delivered.

But if that is all you do, we can tell you definitively right now the \$889 million is inadequate to prevent more cuts. Last year our schools received \$805 million in additional aid. Despite this funding restoration, schools had to make painful cuts. Our state lost another 5,000 teachers. Class sizes rose yet again and once again instructional cuts were made. Summer school was reduced. Extra help for students was reduced. Honors courses, electives, extracurricular activities and sports were reduced.² Unless you add funding over and above the Executive proposal then once again you will be voting for more classroom cuts.

Another problem is that increasingly the Executive is proposing to add temporary school aid. The competitive grants are temporary aid; they do not go into the base school aid for you to build on in future years. The Fiscal Stabilization Funds is projected as a one-shot, not as annual funding. Funding lost by New York City and other school districts as a result of the lack of a teacher evaluation deal is not just \$240 million; it is \$240 million each and every year from now on. Schools need stable and sustainable funding.

Let me be clear this is not just about funding, it is about classroom cuts that result from a lack of funding.

Just last week, Olean, a school district in Western New York, held a rally in the snow to protest the lack of adequate funding for their schools, which over the last three years lost \$7 million.

¹ NYS Board of Regents Proposal on State Aid to School Districts for School Year 2013-14 <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/meetings/2012Meetings/December2012/1212saa1.pdf>

² NYSSBA (2012). The New Reality for Schools: The First Budget under the Tax Cap. NYSCOSS (2012). Can't Get there from Here: Budgeting Challenges Call for New Directions in State Policy to Help Schools Raise Student Achievement http://nyscoss.org/img/news/news_m4u1j66zda.pdf

Yonkers had to reduce its exemplar prekindergarten program back to half day and cut back on guidance counselors.

Central Islip, Elwood, and Westbury cut their full day Kindergarten to half day.

Wyandanch cut their middle school arts program and made cuts to guidance counselors.

New Paltz cut pre-k and increased class sizes and this year is choosing between cutting Advanced Placement courses or a foreign language

Poughkeepsie has cut 113 instructional positions, made cuts to art and music, eliminated recess, cut full day kindergarten to half day and cut an alternative program for disruptive secondary students. The Superintendent of Poughkeepsie says that “social progress for us means that the education programs we have tried to support have been cut back and reduced.”

Madrid-Waddington³ superintendent said that: “Elementary, art, music, health, driver’s education, elementary counselor have all been reduced.” Also, junior and senior high school students have experienced a loss of electives because of staff reductions. Extra help programs have been reduced and a middle school homework club has been lost. She added “The loss of program and staff indicate that we are closer to educational insolvency, or diminished capacity to provide the necessary educational opportunities for all students to be able to graduate with career and college readiness.”

Utica lost 217 positions⁴

South Colonie cut its marching band.⁵

Cohoes cut its elementary music program.⁶

Syracuse reduced extra help to students in the form of interventions⁷

The story is the same in almost every district across the state. And this is the script for the future unless you add funding in this budget.

A few months ago, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, which is now a project of the Education Law Center, wrote a letter to the Governor and the legislature urging you to return to the CFE remedy. The letter states that at the current pace CFE will not be fulfilled until 2028 and warns that, “Thus, two more generations of New York children will pass through our schools before

³ The Watertown Daily Times, December 9, 2012. Madrid-Waddington could be financially insolvent in five years

⁴ <http://www.uticaod.com/news/x221018333/217-positions-cut-in-Utica-school-district-taxes-to-rise-2>

⁵ Report from the Superintendent

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⁷ <http://www.syracusecityschools.com/budget/2012-13>

the State even begins to approach meeting its constitutional obligation to adequately fund its public schools through implementation of the CFE remedy.” The letter concludes by saying, “We urge you to bring New York State into compliance with the state constitution by making fulfillment of the CFE remedy a top priority for the upcoming budget and legislative session. This priority is not only necessary to reverse the educationally destructive trends of the past three years, but to ensure State fulfillment of its constitutional obligations to New York school children.”

It took us almost fifteen years of fight and of litigation to reach that landmark decision. We thought that schoolchildren would finally get the chance to which they had a right. Yet, six years after that decision, we are still asking for the state to meet its constitutional obligation.

All of these cuts are happening while NYS has raised its standards and expectations of our students. With the new Common Core standards and the raised scoring on ELA and Math to reflect college and career readiness, our schools are called to provide much more with much less. How can we possibly be asking our schools to prepare students for college when in fact in a lot of cases they are on the brink of insolvency both fiscal and educational?

There is an educational crisis and something has to be done about it. On December 5, 2012, 800 people from across the state, as far north as Canton, as far south as New York City and Long Island, as far west as Olean and Buffalo and as far east as Cohoes, came to Albany to protest the devastating cuts to their schools, asking for their dreams not to be deferred and not to be denied.

The reality is simple: unless you add more money to education funding, unless you eliminate the cap to state aid, our schools will continue to make cuts year in and year out.

Our ask is simple: Will you fund our schools?