



Governor's Executive Budget
February 8, 2023

TESTIMONY BEFORE

Joint Legislative Budget Committees
Public Hearing on the Executive Elementary & Secondary Education Budget

ROCHESTER CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT
Dr. Carmine Peluso, Superintendent

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State Budget Testimony

Budget Testimony Before New York State Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the Executive Elementary & Secondary Education Budget – February 8, 2023

Presented By:

Dr. Carmine Peluso, Superintendent
Rochester City School District

I am Dr. Carmine Peluso, Superintendent of the Rochester City School District (RCSD). Thank you for the opportunity to address you and discuss our priorities for the Executive Budget and its impact on our District. I want to extend a special thank you to the Chairs of these committees, the Rochester Delegation, and the entire Legislature for fulfilling your commitment to Foundation Aid Funding. I am grateful for your unwavering commitment to meeting the unique needs of the RCSD.

Rochester is one of the highest-needs school districts in New York State. More than 24% of the student population includes students with disabilities. RCSD serves approximately 3,500 English Language Learners and provides services to students speaking more than 60 languages.

We have been actively working to address concerns around school safety, social-emotional health, and significant staffing shortages. Our recovery from the pandemic continues, and we are making strides to invest in tomorrow for our students. The following are several key priorities the Board of Education and I have outlined for this year.

Foundation Aid: *Maintain the Commitment to the Foundation Aid Phase-In*

We are pleased that the Executive Budget maintains the commitment to the Foundation Aid phase-in; however, there should be no mandated set-asides in the budget. The decisions on funding allocations should be made locally to meet the distinct student needs of the District. The needs identified in the set aside are being addressed through federal relief, title, and general funds. Going forward, we urge the State to ensure that the Foundation Aid formula is transparent, predictable, and captures unique student needs.

American Rescue Plan (ARP) Dollars

Districts like the RCSD want to ensure ARP dollars are utilized to continue to positively impact our District. We urge the State to apply for an expansion to use ARP dollars by supporting an 18-month liquidation extension of ARP funds to March 31, 2026, beyond the current deadline of September 30, 2024.

Charter Schools: *Limit Charter School Expansion, Repair the Authorization and Funding Systems and Enhance Accountability and Oversight*

Limit charter school saturation to 10% in urban centers allowing for school choice while limiting the financial burden on public school districts. In Rochester, charter school enrollment has already exceeded 10% in recent years. Currently, approximately 7,000 or 24% of public school students in the City of Rochester attend charter schools. The number and percentage of students continue to increase as charter school capacity increases. In 2022-23, RCSD will pay out in excess of \$100 million in charter school tuition and associated transportation and support services costs.

Students enrolling in charter schools are coming from every school and grade level in the District, making it difficult to offset additional tuition expenses with reductions in existing District programs and classrooms. In addition, supplemental charter school tuition payments must be reimbursed in the year they are paid. School districts should not be burdened with cash flow struggles and short-term borrowing expenses caused by delayed reimbursement. Furthermore, enhanced accountability measures must be applied to charter schools to ensure that year-round enrollment accurately reflects District student demographics.

Charter school expansion in the City of Rochester must be limited, and the New York State Board of Regents designated as the sole authorizing entity. The State must also prohibit charter schools from expanding to serve additional grade levels when this would alter the school's current grade configuration.

Career and Technical Education (CTE): *Expand Special Services Aid*

The current CTE programs in RCSD are impactful and provide more opportunities for students post-graduation. The \$3,900 per student formula-based funding cap under Special Services Aid for CTE must be increased and reimbursement adjusted to align with current programs to capture 9th-grade students.

Prekindergarten: *Fully Fund Prekindergarten Programs in High Need School Districts*

Support is needed to bring equitable funding to the RCSD which started receiving funding for pre-kindergarten in the early phase of the program and is currently being paid \$1,944 less per student than districts that recently started receiving prekindergarten funding. 71 % of the State's pre-kindergartners are educated in the Big 5 school districts. However, funding levels have not been adjusted to capture the actual costs of these vital programs.

Social Emotional/Health Services: *Reinstate and Increase School Health Services Funding and Provide Critical Resources to Meet Social Emotional Needs*

The RCSD provides valuable health services to our students as required under Education Law due to many students needing more access to physical and mental health services outside of the regular school day. We urge you to reinstate the \$1.2 million Rochester School Health Services Grants funds that have been removed from the Governor's budget. These services provide additional targeted school health funding to assist our District with increased demands.

English Language Learners (ELLs): *Provide Additional funding*

The State must provide more support for ELL students through a designated categorical program and an expansion of the weighting for ELL pupils under Foundation Aid. Our District serves large numbers of refugee students who speak little to no English and need expanded services. More funding is required in order to support additional bilingual teachers, translators, and support services.

Professional Development: *Target Funding for Critical Professional Development*

Additional resources must be provided to support ongoing and enhanced professional development initiatives for teachers and principals. There is currently no targeted State funding for these programs, which are essential to improving instructional quality and student outcomes.

Teacher Shortage: *Implement the Board of Regents recommendations to address the teacher shortage this year and for years to come*

We support the Governor's extension of the retiree earning waiver extension and recommend it be expanded to include operational staff who are in the NYS Employees Retirement System. Such a waiver will provide school districts with another avenue by which to pursue filling vacancies in many shortage areas. We urge the State to make the required investments and think creatively about providing flexibility.

Expand the alternative teacher certification process, simplify the certification process, and provide college tuition programs and financial assistance for students earning education degrees. Provide school districts funding to *grow our own* by funding tuition assistance and teacher residency programs for undergraduate and graduate students. Expand out-of-state reciprocity for teacher certification by affording automatic certification for those certified in other states and territories.

Support Civil Service reforms to address labor shortages in our schools. Challenges with civil service selection and hiring can be mitigated through consistent administration of exams, standard grading metrics, and modernization of exam content. In addition, the transition from provisional to permanent appointments, an electronic canvassing process, and expanding the number of eligible employees for appointments to a Rule of 5 will ensure a streamlined hiring process.

Transportation: *Reimburse Urban School Districts for Transportation to Keep Students Safe*

The current Transportation Aid mileage limitations are not aligned with the conditions in our State's urban districts like RSCD. While the State acted to address this issue, no action was taken to afford students in large cities the same protections. It is imperative that the State address this issue by providing reimbursement for school transportation below the current 1.5-mile limit in instances where the State Education Department deems there is a safety issue.

State Monitor Funding: The District has been working with the state-appointed monitor and making strides to improve the District's academic and fiscal performance. We ask that the budget reduction to cover the costs of the monitor be reallocated. The legislature's commitment to the State Monitor program must be a priority in the Governor's budget.

Thank you again for supporting the Rochester City School District and prioritizing student needs.