

***Yonkers Public Schools District***  
***Testimony Before***  
***New York State***  
***Commission on Property Tax Relief***



**YONKERS PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

***October 22, 2008***

Presented By:  
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Yonkers Public Schools District

**Commission on Property Tax Relief  
Testimony – Bernard P. Pierorazio  
Superintendent of Schools**

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to address this group today. My name is Bernard Pierorazio, proud to not only be the Superintendent of the Yonkers School District but also a graduate of the public schools in this city.

As we know the financial forecast at both the federal and state level is at best disconcerting and at worst devastating. This obviously is of utmost concern to the Big 5; NYC, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers, all of us who are dependent school districts. We are without the authority to set a tax rate, or have the populace weigh in on that assessment. We are compelled to ultimately work with the executive branch of local government making an impassioned plea not to cut the education budget dollars which will retard and stifle the progress that the Big 5 have made toward closing the achievement gap, significantly improving test results and graduation rates for students.

This is not to say that the Big 5 or any school district should have a blank check in light of difficult economic times, but we should continue to be funded appropriately to manage our organizations in a prudent and economically accountable manner.

The Yonkers Public Schools have witnessed exceptional growth in the area of student achievement. Last year alone our students in grades three through eight experienced a 9.5% increase in the area of English Language Arts. In the area of Mathematics, our students achieved over a 13% increase, translating into better than 65% of our children showing state proficiency.

The Yonkers Public Schools has a robust pre-kindergarten program that has been in existence since 1998. Over 1400 students are enrolled annually in our district. Their achievement levels far exceed their counterparts who have not attended our early childhood programs. Despite the fact that the NYS reimbursement cost is negligible, the district fully supports pre-kindergarten.

At the high school level, students sat for more than 1600 Advanced

Placement and International Baccalaureate exams and our graduation rate increased by over 9 percentage points. Partnerships with colleges, universities and businesses are blooming. The beginning of an educational foundation has created student opportunities, never imagined in the history of the fourth largest school district in the state.

Through smart fiscal management and planning, opportunities for high school students to graduate on time by attending CARE, our credit recovery program, exist. Young children are engaged in the educational process in our after school academies. Summer programs at various colleges allow our students to experience college life, albeit for two weeks, but a true experience on a college campus for eighth graders is an experience that will change a child's path for the future. Our high school scholars interning at IBM or attending classes at Manhattan College School of Engineering are all possible because of adequate funding.

These are opportunities for a school age population in which 80% are characterized as being at the poverty level. The majority of our students may come from homes labeled as low income, but they have hopes. We as educators and parents have nothing but high expectations for these children to succeed as they have never succeeded before. We insist, as did NASA during the Apollo 13 flight, that in our district, failure is not an option. Furthermore, we inculcate into every one of our students, *College is in Your Future*.

These are but a short list of the outstanding accomplishments made in the Yonkers Public Schools, and I assure you that each of my colleagues in the other Big 5 districts have equally impressive examples of student success. Make no mistake, the successes we have experienced are due in large part to the educational policies established under the present administration in Albany, the keen and astute leadership of the Mayor of this city and support from the city council as well as the guidance of the Board of Trustees. Our state representatives continue to work valiantly in providing education dollars to the city school district but are impeded by the inequities established by the present foundation formula.

Each of you must realize that all of this good will, all of the academic

achievements, all of the stability of good relationships with labor, especially our professional staff and civil servant would be dashed if you were not to continue supporting our districts at the present levels with the optimism of potential cost of living increases from Albany.

We know that we are not insulated from the cuts in Albany simply because the burden will have to be picked up at the local level. I'm sure you will hear from our mayor that local support for education may have to diminish even in light of the legislative mandate that municipalities in the Big 5 must maintain financial support to their districts at a designated base year rate. But we understand that if the City has to cut its services by 10% or greater, then we would also suffer a 10% or greater reduction.

Ten percent of city contributions to education would total close to 24 million dollars and translate into a devastating loss of services. Translate that into jobs and we would lose over 400 teachers or twice that in civil servants. I would find it difficult, if not impossible, to open the school doors in September of 2009 if the cuts reached this level. We have already experienced devastating cut backs in 2003, reductions that we still have not recovered.

### **How can the state help local districts?**

Let's begin with an equitable funding formula, one that actually recognizes the impediments that a large urban district confronts on a daily basis and not base it on a formula that calculates property value. We are the fourth largest city, with a school population that registers nearly 80% of our children at the poverty level, located in one of the richest counties in not only New York State but the nation. I tell you that the formula is broken and the taxpayers of this great city continue to shoulder over 50% of the tax burden for the school district while our counterparts in western New York pay a fraction of their taxes toward the schools. This is an obvious inequity that is quite real.

In the area of capital improvements, our plan for the rehabilitation of our schools is at a standstill. The city government has continued to support our efforts by bonding over \$70 million, far short of our need of \$300 million. This is because our reimbursement rate is also based on property value allowing only a 47% reimbursement for capital projects while the western region realizes over 94% state reimbursement on capital projects.

Additionally, you will hear the cry from Montauk to Erie County, from Plattsburgh to Staten Island, that school districts need mandate relief. As we move forward, we need relief from health care, educational mandates and administrative costs imposed upon us by the state legislature and federal government. We continue to receive legislative mandates with not even a hint of funding. Some of the more significant impacts of unfunded mandates on the Yonkers School District are:

- **Compliance with GASB 45**

In June, 2004 the Government Accounting Standards Board issued statement No. 45 which establishes new accounting standards for post retirement benefits other than pensions. Like most governmental employers, Yonkers Public Schools has been accounting for these benefits each year on a “pay-as-you-go” basis. Providing for the annual required contribution as mandated by GASB 45 will cost the District an astounding **\$64,600,000** in FY 09/10.

Annual Cost      \$64,600,000

- **NYSHIP**

New York State’s health care consortium continues to demand annual increases for providing health care to our workers even though they are presently nurturing a 6 billion dollar surplus. Our rates this year are projected to increase by 6.6 % nearing \$61.3 million up from \$57.7 million last year.

Annual Cost      \$61,300,000.00

- **Special Education Mandates**

Current laws require caps on class size, counseling, occupational therapy, physical therapy, consultants for specialized services, tuition to specialized private and public schools, transportation costs and summer programs.

Annual Cost      \$33,500,000

- **BOCES Tuition Discrepancies**

BOCES centers which are part of the State Education Department are allowed to set fees for services independent of one another even though they are all subject to the Seneca Falls agreement. The Seneca Falls agreement implicitly states that out of district tuition should not be more than \$28,644. An example comparing all three state agencies is as follows: Therapeutic Support for an Emotionally Disturbed student differs at three local BOCES:

Southern Westchester	Northern Westchester	Rockland
<u>Tuition:</u>		
\$63,194.00	\$56,109.00	\$49,645.00
<u>Aide Cost:</u>		
\$54,632.00	\$41,121.00	\$41,258.00
<u>Administrative Non-Member Cost:</u>		
16%	13.5%	10%

**Annual Cost      \$10,400,000.**

- **Transportation Costs**

State funding has practically disappeared in this category due to an annual reduction in the state share of transporting students. At one time the state picked up 90% of the cost of transportation and presently the state picks up only 54% of the total cost.

Annual Cost      \$11,200,000.

- **Americans with Disabilities Act**

The goal of affording all of our children access to all of our schools, regardless of what personal challenges they may face, is laudable and supported fully by Yonkers Public Schools. However, the cost of bringing 27 of our 40 schools into minimum compliance with the unfunded mandates articulated in the Americans with Disabilities Act is prohibitive.

Cost of Compliance    \$6,750,000

- **Charter Schools**

Districts are required to pay the per pupil costs to private charter schools, even though many are not union affiliated, as well as providing additional support services for special needs children along with transportation and nursing services.

Annual Cost        \$3,200,000

- **Supplemental Education Services**

Tutorial sessions must be offered to students who have not performed at the proficiency level. The federal/state mandate states that these services must be provided by a recommended vendor but not the school district at the approximate cost of \$2000. per child. This mandate can potentially tie up instructional funds to the extent of 20% of our annual Title I budget

Annual Cost        \$2,515,000.

- **Data Warehousing**

Data reporting requirements by the NYSED have increased dramatically. This includes software and hardware associated with reporting, staff and training costs.

Annual Costs        \$762,000

- **No Child Left Behind**

This federal mandate not only requires the coordination of testing for ten thousand students but also requires that the local district plan and execute the correction of these exams in the areas of English, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science. The English Language Arts exam in three grades have four written sections which must be read, reread and calibrated at the local district's expense. There is training, substitute coverage and overtime expenditures which total greater than a million dollars for this district

Annual Cost      \$676,000

- **Construction Mandates Wicks Law**

The economies of scale could not be recognized due to the separate bidding requirements of the Wicks Law.

Annual Cost      \$700,000.

- **Health Care Screenings**

The state has now approved an unimpeded 11 hour leave for cancer screening in various areas for municipal and state workers. Now this is a wonderful idea, but to mandate an additional unfunded 11 hours of leave for municipal workers who now have one of the most liberal personal leave and sick day benefit policies will become a serious cost obligation on districts. We have 3,906 employees. Who will pay the cost of class coverage for the educators who choose to take advantage of the eleven hours of leave time? At over a hundred dollars a day for 1,991 teachers the potential cost is staggering, an additional \$299,000, not to mention the lost man hours for clerical, custodial, cafeteria and administrative staff that would increase the number to over a half million dollars.

Annual Cost      \$1,576,000.

- **Family Medical Leave Act**

Legislation will now require that present unpaid leave become paid leave \$394,000

Annual Cost      \$394,000

- **Nurse Care to Private/Parochial Schools**

Districts are required to provide equitable nursing services to private and parochial schools in addition to providing services for special needs students.

Annual Cost      \$271,000

- **Audit Functions**

The Comptrollers Office now requires two additional audit functions; the claims auditor and the internal auditor both who report directly to the Board of Trustees. This is beyond the annual external audit which the district is also responsible for funding.

Annual Cost      \$200,000.

- **Defibrillators**

To be available in every school building and every school sponsored event, athletic competition and staff or parent training. Then there is the responsibility for the district to have an individual at the event who is fully trained on the use of the defibrillator. Cost of units; training and overtime.

Annual Cost      \$108,000



Our children are the faces of the future, entrusting us with their education. It is our absolute responsibility to provide these children with excellence in learning, readying them to become adults who steadfastly contribute to their families, their communities, and their country.