

Yonkers Public Schools District

Testimony Before

Joint Legislative Budget Committee



YONKERS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

February 2, 2010

Presented By:
Bernard P. Pierorazio, Superintendent
Yonkers Public Schools District

Bernard P. Pierorazio
Superintendent of Schools
Testimony – Joint Legislative Budget Committee
February 2, 2010

Good morning. My name is Bernard Pierorazio and as Superintendent of the Yonkers Public Schools, I come before you this morning representing the 25,000 students and over 4,000 employees. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Joint Committee regarding the Governor's proposed Executive Budget for 2010 – 2011.

You have heard from other school districts about the catastrophic impact the Executive Budget 2010 - 2011 will have on those students most in need. The Yonkers Public Schools will be no less affected. The district has and is conscientious in regard to financial matters, putting forth a budgetary increase of less than one percent for the 2009-2010 academic year and building a modest fund balance in prior years which we used, along with federal stimulus dollars, to balance this year's budget.

We understand all too well that we must live within our means as we, the Yonkers Public Schools, do not have the authority to set a tax rate or assessment to pay for new mandates or disruptions in revenue. We have instituted systemic reforms to insure fiscal responsibility, maintained a lean central office staff and recouped a portion of employee health care contributions at the negotiating table. We have aggressively reduced supply and contract budgets over the years and remain vigilant about keeping downward pressure on those items.

The recitation of devastation that the Governor's proposed budget will visit upon the children of this State is clear and well known to all of you. But there is another path. You may join us in the journey toward excellence in education for our children, where college is an aspiration for every student and help insure that every student will compete and succeed in a global economy. Or you may ignore reality, and deny how short-changing our children today will unalterably cripple the foundation of their future.

The troubling miscalculation of the Governor’s budget proposal is known to all of us, but it is often ignored because it is either too painful or simply too unsettling to admit:

It is a mistake to support the Governor’s proposed budget, which will amount to \$22.33 million in cuts for Yonkers alone, when we all know that such draconian cuts will devastate an instructional program that has recently realized exceptional growth in student achievement.

REDUCTIONS IN NYS AID			
Gap Elimination Adjustment	\$ 15,803,033.00		
Video Lottery Participation*	\$ 1,960,000.00		
Summer Tuition	\$ 917,571.00		
Loss of Discretionary Aid	\$ 3,650,000.00		
Total	\$ 22,330,604.00		
*Yonkers is the only school district impacted in this way			

The Yonkers Public Schools has a robust pre-kindergarten program; enabling students to far exceed their counterparts who do not attend district early childhood programs. Even the youngest of students are inculcated with the belief that “College is in My Future.”

The four-year graduation rate has increased by 9% (highest of the Big 5) and the Class of 2009 earned over \$30 million in scholarships. The District has also implemented a pre-kindergarten through eighth grade model and is focusing capital on funding 300 million dollars for the remediation of health and safety issues in all of our school buildings.

It is a mistake to support the proposed Executive Budget because it makes severe cuts to dependent school districts, like Yonkers, while

ignoring the systemic reforms and budgetary discipline, we had begun to institute long before financial crises became front-page news. Dependent school districts like Yonkers had to plan ahead – unlike other businesses, we cannot limit our focus to particular “markets” or profitable sectors. So, we rebuilt our special education program while reducing associated costs, lowered our overtime costs by over 16% this year and have taken the first steps in a long overdue upgrade of our technology infrastructure. Two-thirds of our children live in poverty; they cannot “opt-out” of public education and we will not “opt-out” of their futures.

	BUFFALO	ROCHESTER	SYRACUSE	YONKERS	NEW YORK CITY
10-11 Formula Total (doesn't include UPK)	\$ 527,469,887.00	\$ 427,869,587.00	\$ 254,706,760.00	\$ 222,266,141.00	\$ 7,273,624,088.00
UPK	\$ 12,761,642.00	\$ 10,824,485.00	\$ 8,076,552.00	\$ 4,269,388.00	\$ 235,331,808.00
Building Aid	\$ 94,314,285.00	\$ 20,783,878.00	\$ 10,229,197.00	\$ 5,776,564.00	\$ 884,133,186.00
Sub-Total	\$634,545,814.00	\$459,477,950.00	\$273,012,509.00	\$232,312,093.00	\$8,393,089,082.00
Gap Elimination Adjustment	\$ (18,377,428.00)	\$ (19,106,586.00)	\$ (11,132,286.00)	\$ (15,803,033.00)	\$ (441,920,169.00)
TOTAL AID 10/11	\$616,168,386.00	\$440,371,364.00	\$261,880,223.00	\$216,509,060.00	\$7,951,168,913.00
TOTAL AID 09/10	\$ 635,637,714.00	\$ 459,955,984.00	\$ 270,642,686.00	\$ 231,588,567.00	\$ 8,354,460,290.00
Difference	\$ (19,469,328.00)	\$ (19,584,620.00)	\$ (8,762,463.00)	\$ (15,079,507.00)	\$ (403,291,377.00)
Percentage Reduction	-3.06%	-4.26%	-3.24%	-6.51%	-4.83%

It is a mistake to support the proposed Executive Budget and ignore the fixed costs of \$391.18 million of salaries and benefits (representing over 74% of our budget) not to mention utilities, fuel costs, debt service and emergency repairs that Yonkers Public Schools has no discretion to reduce. The following chart illustrates the increases in employee benefits.

INCREASES IN EMPLOYEE BENEFITS				
	FY 09/10	FY 10/11	Increase	Percentage Increase
Health Care	\$ 59,238,081.00	\$ 63,233,415.00	\$ 3,995,334.00	6.74%
Civil Service Retirement	\$ 4,342,211.00	\$ 7,382,782.00	\$ 3,040,571.00	70.02%
Teacher Retirement	\$ 12,215,565.00	\$ 18,121,116.00	\$ 5,905,551.00	48.34%
Total	\$ 75,795,857.00	\$ 88,737,313.00	\$ 12,941,456.00	17.07%

We had the foresight to negotiate relatively low increases in the out years of current collective bargaining agreements. But these agreements were negotiated when the expectation was that the state aid formula would be driving \$10 million more in Foundation Aid to the District than the Executive Budget proposes for 2010-2011. If we cannot rely on basic aid assurances, how can we reasonably plan for the future?

It is a mistake to support the proposed Executive Budget without dealing with, for once and for all, the unfunded mandates imposed upon us, such as those associated with the “No Child Left Behind” act and others initiated by the Board of Regents or State Statute, which burden the Yonkers Public Schools by tens of millions of dollars annually.

It is a mistake to support the proposed Executive Budget without first addressing the Foundation Aid formula. As I mentioned earlier, we did not receive the minimum 3% increase this year and will not receive it next year. But all of us in this room know that is the least of the Foundation Aid problem. The method New York State uses to fund our district is seriously flawed, resulting in an underlying inequity that has historically plagued the Yonkers Public Schools. The Yonkers Board of Trustees, Yonkers Mayor and City Council have spoken out against this continuing unfairness. Our State Senators and Assemblymen have been sympathetic but unable to enact change. I have made this perfectly clear in a position paper presented to legislative budget office staffs last year. Cautious and careful district management, award-winning schools, and progressive educational programs are no match for a flawed State formula. The Yonkers Public Schools is a District in Good Academic Standing, a positive designation we have just achieved after years of hard work. These cuts will precipitate the demise of our academic accomplishments by forcing the District to dismantle our school staff and programs. To add financial cuts to an already inequitable formula is unconscionable.

It is a mistake, and perhaps the biggest mistake, to support the proposed Executive Budget when every single one of you knows that the poorest students in New York State, in urban districts like the Big

5, will shoulder a disproportionate amount of the burden. This fact is clear and has been demonstrated. The Executive Budget 2010 – 2011 indicates a per student reduction that acts in inverse proportion to the Combined Wealth Ratio of a district. Put simply, districts serving the wealthiest students are hurt the least while those serving impoverished populations pay the most per capita.

This was illustrated most clearly in the January 23rd article in the New York Times written by Nicholas Confessore, “*Depth of School Cuts Depends on Who Gets Them*”. It illustrated a 24% cut to a wealthy Long Island district that amounted to \$170,588 which, in reality is easily surmountable by that district. In comparison, the Yonkers Public Schools will be reduced overall by 7.1%, the highest reduction of all the Big Five districts, which translates into 15.8 million dollars or the potential loss of 225 teaching positions. Is that fair? This amounts to a head tax, but instead of one amount being assessed for each student equally, the poorest students pay the highest amounts. The Gap Elimination Adjustment amounts to nearly \$660 for every student in Yonkers. The unfairness of the Gap Elimination Adjustment is breathtaking. Don’t place the greatest burden on the poorest and most underserved children; if budgets must be reduced, spread the burden equally among all the students in every district throughout the state.

	BUFFALO	ROCHESTER	SYRACUSE	YONKERS	NEW YORK CITY
10-11 Formula Total (doesn't include UPK)	\$ 527,469,887.00	\$ 427,869,587.00	\$ 254,706,760.00	\$ 222,266,141.00	\$ 7,273,624,088.00
Gap Elimination Adjustment	\$ 18,377,428.00	\$ 19,106,586.00	\$ 11,132,286.00	\$ 15,803,033.00	\$ 441,920,169.00
09-10 Public Enrollment (Without PreK)	39,722.00	33,679.00	20,940.00	23,959.00	995,962.00
Formula Aid per Pupil	13,279.04	12,704.34	12,163.65	9,276.94	7,303.11
GEA per Pupil	\$ 462.65	\$ 567.31	\$ 531.63	\$ 659.59	\$ 443.71
GEA as % of Formula Total	3.48%	4.47%	4.37%	7.11%	6.08%

None of us want to ignore the serious reality of this fiscal crisis, but we need a fighting chance. Several years ago, the Yonkers Public

Schools realized it could not make lasting change without facing the “brutal facts”. Facing those facts have allowed us to maintain and improve excellence in our schools while managing the district in a fiscally responsible way. In turn, there are brutal facts you must face about the Governor’s proposed budget for 2010 – 2011. This budget will cause massive personnel reductions in a district that is overpopulated (569 new students) and already understaffed by a loss of over 132 FTEs after last year’s reductions. Among the terminated will be the newest teachers, those with the brightest futures, who, like their more experienced colleagues, maintain a will and compassion for students.

It is easy to be cynical in these times, but none of you chose a life in public service to be cynics. On behalf of over 25,000 Yonkers Public Schools students whose hopes and dreams depend on a credible public commitment to keep your promise to fund education at specific levels, I implore you to choose hope and to stop the ruinous cuts that were proposed by the Governor. Support educational progress, fiscal responsibility, and fundamental fairness to the children we serve. Their future is the only future we have.

It is the district’s absolute responsibility to provide our children with excellence in learning, readying them to become adults who steadfastly contribute to their families, their communities, their country and their world. We cannot do this job without your help.

Thank you.