



Yonkers Children: A Proven Return on Investment



CONFRONT ISSUES OF EQUITY IMPLEMENT SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENTS SUCCESS

**Budget Testimony before the New York State
Joint Legislative Fiscal and Education Committees**

Presented February 6, 2019 by:
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Superintendent of Schools

Yonkers Public Schools
Confront Issues of Equity
Implement Sustainable Solutions for Students Success

Distinguished members of the Joint Legislative Fiscal and Education Committees I thank you, once again, for the opportunity to address you on behalf of the Yonkers City School District; I am Dr. Edwin M. Quezada, Superintendent of Schools. It is an honor to proudly report that the state of the Yonkers Public Schools is strong. It's evident in our students' continuous improvement on achievement and accountability outcomes supported by data. Additionally, we have received many state and national accolades for our school programs.

Our mantra is *Yonkers Public Schools: A Proven Return on Investment*. Over the past few years, we have garnered considerable community support because of our success. Our learning community embraces challenges with humility and understands that today's students and families require out of the box thinking to increase engagement. The results are magnificent.

Maintaining this momentum requires dependable recurring revenue that addresses the complex needs of the children in the fourth largest city in the State. For decades, equitable funding for the Yonkers school system has been our persistent mission. Yonkers annual education budget gap forces us to plead for and rely on one-shot appropriations generously provided by the Governor and our Delegation. This year we are facing a \$60 million budget gap on a status quo budget. Now is the time for courageous actions. With your help, we can stop this cycle, embrace the mantle of the Governor's *Justice Agenda* and ensure equitable quality education for Yonkers children for generations to come.

Here is why your investment in Yonkers children's education was and will continue to pay it forward. In August 2017 and 2018, our graduates achieved an on-time 86% graduation rate, which continues to be higher than the State average. We are the first Big 5 City school district to achieve an 80% and above graduation rate. Our 2018 dropout rate is 3%, again, lower by half than the State's average, and it has decreased by 61% since 2015. It is the August on time graduation rate which truly reveals that our students continue to demonstrate they are on a positive path towards graduation as well as college and career readiness. By giving our students an additional two months of support to achieve graduation requirements, they make significant progress. Yonkers' on time graduation rate was able to increase by 6 percentage points to 86% from June to August. Even more impressive is how this extra time escalates achievement for our subgroups resulting in graduation rate increases for English Language Learners, Students with Disabilities, as well as our Black and Hispanic students. This trend continues through the work that we do to ensure our students remain in school.

Our 2013 Cohort graduation rate is 90% for students who needed five years to attain their diplomas. This reinforces Yonkers belief that we must provide opportunities for students to remain in school with right supports beyond four years in high school; it is our social responsibility.

Three Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs were recently selected as models for New York. These are among the 25 CTE programs offered in Yonkers that are founded in meaningful partnerships with the business and industry professionals who serve on craft committees with our educators to prepare our students for industry standard jobs. We strive to

offer more career options. With your help and additional funding these opportunities can be replicated in more of our schools.

Our outstanding graduation rate is the result of targeted supports for all students. Yonkers' data-driven practices identify students who, without support, may not achieve academic and social success. We know that our young men of color continue to lag behind in all metrics: low graduation rate, below standard in all State assessments, lower attendance along with higher drop-out and suspension rates. The unfortunate outcome is a disturbing incarceration rate for black and brown young men. Yonkers is dramatically reversing these negative statistics through our vibrant My Brother's Keeper (MBK) movement. Yonkers MBK is touted as a model program in New York State and has gained considerable national recognition with our city partners, Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano and Rev. Dr. Jim Bostic of the Nepperhan Community Center. The MBK principles emphasize that all adults in the community are responsible for the education of our young people. Our community is energized and embraces all of the milestones of the MBK movement from birth to graduation and beyond.

Three years ago under the School Receivership statute eight (8) Yonkers schools were identified as either Persistently Struggling or Struggling. Today, six (6) of these schools are Schools in Good Standing, one (1) is a Targeted Support & Improvement school and only one (1) school remains as a Comprehensive Support & Improvement school. This outcome exemplifies our learning community's commitment to all students in every school.

Yonkers leads the way with technology, as the first large district to administer districtwide Computer-Based Testing (CBT) for the State assessments in English Language Arts and Mathematics for grades three through eight. We are the model for CBT in New York State.

The foundation for this success is our relentless commitment to Early Childhood Education. We implement a model prekindergarten (Pre-K) program with focused services for special needs and bilingual students. Countless studies speak to the benefits of research-based Pre-K programs; our own data validates its contributions. Pre-K promotes school readiness and improves students' ability to read on grade level by Grade 3, thereby fostering long-term educational success. Our challenge in Yonkers is sustainable recurring revenue aligned to Pre-K expenses. We are forced to rely on grants; therefore, our ability to maintain a sound Pre-K program is as inconsistent as our revenue. The federal PK Expansion Grant initiated four years ago ends this year. We appreciate the Governor including additional funding enabling Yonkers to continue our extremely beneficial Pre-K program next year.

Unfortunately, the current State revenue runs indicate \$12.1 million for Universal Prekindergarten in Yonkers. Our total cost for 1,400 four-year olds in full day Pre-K is \$20 million. I ask that the State fully fund prekindergarten in Yonkers by increasing our appropriation by \$8 million to a total of \$20.1 million.

Yonkers has embraced the Community Schools Model in seven schools. Our diverse students and parents, especially our Students with Disabilities and English language learners, truly benefit from on-site health and mental health clinics, dental services as well as extra-curricular activities. These systems of support accelerate learning, reduce drop-out and suspension rates, increase attendance and lead to an overall healthier community. **Community Schools with flexible targeted supports are costly to implement and maintain. The Governor's proposal limits school district's flexibility to align services with the school community's needs. For Yonkers to maintain our programs with fidelity, I am requesting two changes to the Governor's proposed appropriation. Increase Yonkers total Community Schools set-aside from \$7.6 million to \$15 million with a commensurate increase in**

Foundation Aid. In addition, continue the flexibility in the current legislation that enables us to target funds to schools where there is the greatest need.

Over the last four years, the City of Yonkers and the Yonkers Board of Education have formed a model partnership, the Inter-Municipal Agreement (IMA), to share some key municipal services. Beyond the fiscal efficiencies this partnership provides, it fosters a dynamic foundation to support an equitable public education system that will serve Yonkers for generation to come. As a dependent school district, the IMA offers our local elected officials a greater understanding for our complex fiscal and educational obligations.

However, our unified commitment is hampered by Yonkers dependency on New York State funding that fails to address vital necessary recurring revenue. The Foundation Aid formula as it exists today, which I noted earlier, forces Yonkers to annually plead for and rely on one-shot appropriations. Yonkers Public Schools balanced 2018-2019 budget includes \$32.9 million dollars in non-recurrent revenue – depleted the school district’s unassigned fund balance of \$24.1 million and received \$8.8 million in Bullet Aid. **This structural financial problem can only be solved by correcting the assumptions of the Foundation Aid formula. The current formula does not address the needs of our children – over 79% of them live in poverty and more than 15,000 families are dependent on public assistance.**

The Foundation Aid formula appropriates \$7,989 dollars per pupil to Yonkers.

Conversely, our sister cities receive significantly higher per pupil appropriations, which they deserve and need - \$12,288 for Buffalo, \$13,127 for Rochester and \$12,344 for Syracuse. However, Yonkers also needs and deserves the same level of per pupil appropriation. A simple formula correction for Yonkers would solve this problem. The antiquated Foundation Aid formula puts Yonkers at a 52.8% Foundation Aid ratio, while Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse are at 90%. **Today, I ask you to increase Yonkers Foundation Aid ratio by 25 percentage points, to increase Yonkers ratio to 77%. Foundation Aid calculated at 77% would raise the Yonkers per pupil appropriation to \$11,771. This level of recurring appropriation offers equity for Yonkers students and this community. Recurring revenue at this level insures consistent equitable educational services that our students deserve and are entitled to receive.**

The Governor’s proposal offers a 2.2% increase that is \$4.4 million in Foundations Aid for Yonkers. Our school district’s status quo expenses are projected to increase 3.5%, which is \$22 million. These expense increases are beyond our control. They include health insurance that is up 3.7% as well as salary and contractual obligations that are up 5.1%. After a property tax levy increase of 6.2% last year, the City of Yonkers, the school district’s taxing authority, is at 92.3% of its Constitutional Taxing Limit and labeled by the State Comptroller as being in the “danger zone.” The Foundation aid formula is based on a municipality’s wealth index. Yonkers has exhausted its wealth factor. The City has the highest sales tax in the state, as well as a personal income tax and a real estate transfer tax. Many of our citizens are fixed income homeowners who cannot absorb more tax increases. The Governor’s proposal will not solve Yonkers yearly budget deficit and plea for help. It requires a change in the Foundation Aid formula. **The reality is Yonkers status quo 2019-2020 budget has a \$60 million budget gap that must be addressed if we truly believe in equity for all children.**

In addition, equity for all students will not be realized in Yonkers until we build new schools and repair our antiquated buildings. Our schools average age is 80 years old. It is time to invest in our children and give them state-of-the-art community schools. The citizens of Yonkers alone cannot afford the exponential cost to fix our deteriorating infrastructure. We are asking the

State to provide a fair share, aligned to the funding it provided to Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse where children are taught in state-of-the-art facilities.

Last year, together, the City, the Board of Education, and our State delegation implemented systems of supports to begin rebuilding Yonkers schools. Three new schools for Yonkers children are on the horizon – land parcels are identified, the **Joint School Construction Board (JSCB)** began its work and the design process is moving forward. Thank you for the support through the Modernization Plan legislation to jump start **Rebuild Yonkers Schools**. **To sustain this work, we continue to need your help to secure our fair share of State Capital Improvement Building Aid, Yonkers citizens cannot take on the burden themselves.**

The Yonkers Public Schools welcomes the equity conversation. Over the past five years, our learning community has relentlessly pursued avenues for equity in our teaching and learning as well as providing all of our students' access to opportunities in and out of school. I respectfully suggest, if equity is driving the conversation, that the State reassess the distribution of funds based on the specific needs of the students served and the programs being provided in those schools. The current Transparency Report does not provide evaluation criteria to objectively factor in required instructional programs offered at the individual schools. Giving schools the funding they need, especially those schools with a high poverty rate and students with complex required programmatic needs must be the goal. **The Big 5 districts continue to be underfunded and overwhelmingly poor with an extraordinarily large number of high needs children. Therefore, one must *not* compare poor schools with poorer schools within the same school district. Let us rather compare poor communities to wealthy communities.** This will ensure equity in per-pupil spending for all students regardless of the zip code where they reside. If the State wishes to monitor what is appropriated to each school within a district, the State must guarantee that equitable, sustainable funding is provided to the district.

Often, I refer to the City of Yonkers as the best small urban city in America. Yonkers' economic development renaissance requires a dynamic comprehensive educational community. As you have heard, our diverse student body and school district accomplished significant achievements, and we know there are more to come. Yonkers Board of Education services over 27,000 students in 39 aging public schools, 466 Students with Disabilities in out-of-district placements, 130 students in a 3-year-old program with State funding and over 2,000 adult students in our Adult Education programs. **Our community leaders understand that a great city requires a great educational system.**

The City of Yonkers and the Yonkers Public Schools are systems moving in the right direction. A progressive agenda, focused on the needs of Yonkers' diverse citizens is in place. Yonkers has demonstrated an uncompromising commitment to educate *all* students. The Mayor, City Council, Board of Trustees, PTA, business and community partners, bargaining units and NYSUT, are all working collaboratively toward a common goal – **Equitable Sustainable Solutions for Students Success for generations to come.**

In closing, I look forward to courageous conversations about equitable educational opportunities for all children from every circumstance and background in New York State and most importantly in the City of Yonkers. New York State has courageous leaders in Albany who have demonstrated that they will not rest until the children who have been left behind are given what is needed to propel them to greatness. **Confronting issues of equity begins with equitable funding. Let us not miss this opportunity.**



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**Yonkers
Students
Today**
31,448
Urban
Students

26,547
**Prekindergarten to
Grade Twelve
In-District Students**

- 79%** Economically Disadvantaged
- 17%** Students with Disabilities
- 13%** English Language Learners
- 59%** Hispanic
- 18%** African American/Black
- 23%** White, Asian/Pacific Islander,
American Indian, Multi-Racial

4,874
Yonkers Students in:

- 466** Out-of-District
Students with Disabilities
- 711** Charter School Students
- 3,679** City of Yonkers
Parochial/Private students

These students receive transportation, textbooks, library resources, nurse, pupil support services, Title I, II and III funds and special education services

Yonkers students reside in Westchester County and deserve to have the same educational experiences and opportunities as their peers throughout the county.