

# CLARENCE CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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February 26, 2015

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of New York State  
State Capitol Building  
Albany, New York 12224

### **Re: 2015-16 Executive Budget Proposal**

Dear Governor Cuomo:

I write to you today with an urgent message regarding your proposed 2015-16 Executive Budget. I consider your budget an assault on public education as well as an affront to our students, teachers, parents, and local school boards. Your rhetoric regarding public schools and the teachers and leaders who work in those schools is divisive, inaccurate, and inflammatory.

Public schools in New York State are not a monopoly to be broken, nor are the overwhelming majority of public schools failing. To the contrary, failing schools, by the state's definition, exist in only 2% of the school districts statewide. Public education is the centerpiece of our democracy and a ladder to opportunity and success for all New Yorkers. Attacking teachers and public schools with empty platitudes is not an effective strategy for promoting continuous improvement nor is it a substitute for failing to deliver on the State's constitutional obligation to adequately fund education.

Putting aside your criticism of public schools, the 2015-16 Executive Budget does not contain a school aid proposal. While the Executive Budget proposes sufficient appropriation authority to fund a total year-to-year increase in aid for education of \$1.03 billion, there are no school aid formulas to allocate these funds. Your proposal also dictates that no school will receive any increase in constitutionally protected and court ordered school aid, unless your entire package of ill-conceived education reforms are passed by the Legislature. The political maneuver of holding state education aid hostage, and by proxy holding New York State students' hostage, unless you get your own way is unprecedented, undemocratic, and morally unacceptable.

In addition, school districts are required to submit a 2016 proposed tax levy to the state by March 1<sup>st</sup> in order to calculate a district-specific tax cap figure. Establishing a proposed tax levy is impossible without knowing projected state revenue.

Adequate funding must include removing the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) from the budget formulas. With the state's finances gaining strength, it is no longer possible to justify the continued existence of the GEA that is reducing total state aid by over \$1 billion this year. The GEA was born with the Great Recession when the state had to close huge deficits. Schools shared in the painful choices that effort required, but now that the gap in the state budget has been eliminated, it is time for the GEA to end as well.

Adequate funding should also include honoring the state's obligation to fund school districts at a level sufficient for a sound basic education pursuant to the New York State Court of Appeal's decision in 2007. If New York State had merely increased school aid by the rate of inflation since that decision, districts would have \$2 billion more to support students and programs than they have today. Most of the school districts in New York are still receiving less school aid than in 2008-09, six years ago.

Your proposed reforms to the APPR are wrong-headed. There is no credible scientific evidence that increasing the weight of standardized tests to make judgments of teachers will be a more valid or reliable teacher evaluation methodology. Likewise, studies from the American Statistical Association found that teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores and that the majority of opportunities for quality improvement are found in system-level conditions.

Equally disturbing is the proposal for independent evaluators to conduct the majority of teacher observations. The proposal for independent evaluators would increase costs and administrative demands for schools and likely diminish the efficacy of APPR as a feedback tool by reducing the interaction between teachers and their direct supervisors.

The purpose of an evaluation system has to be greater than merely accurately sorting educators into performance levels. The system needs to help school districts make sound personnel decisions and provide feedback to help educators improve their work, both with an ultimate goal of raising student achievement.

All thoughtful parties in the education arena agree that some reforms are necessary. We know how effective legislation is crafted and it isn't a "my way or the highway" approach that works. Effective legislation requires reasoned debate, gathering research, and framing compromises. I urge you to properly fund schools first, then work on the legislative reforms without making school funding contingent upon passage of any specific reforms. I also encourage you to seek the advice of experts in the field, including teachers and administrators, when considering reform legislation.

Finally, I call on you to observe a moratorium on unfunded mandates. Newly created regulations for the instruction of English Language Learners, the implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards, and the APPR represent three unfunded mandates that add significant cost to school districts budgets. These new programs must be funded or the costs associated with them allowed as an exemption to the levy limit within the property tax cap calculation.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey M. Hicks, Ed.D.  
Superintendent