

**NASSAU-SUFFOLK  
SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

**INVITED TESTIMONY PRESENTED BY  
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**NEW YORK STATE COMMISSION  
ON EDUCATION REFORM  
PUBLIC HEARING**

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**Good afternoon. Thank you members of the New York State Commission on Education Reform for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the charge given you by Governor Pataki to recommend reforms to the education finance system in New York State.**

**On behalf of the 115 member boards of the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association and our President Jeannette Santos, I thank you for providing an opportunity to voice comments and concerns of our members with regard to the implementation of the Court of Appeals decision in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit.**

**For at least the past three decades it would have been difficult to find any school district that has not felt ill-used by New York's state aid distribution. Long Island districts are no exception. Although we are regarded as "suburbia personified", we are a diverse region. The school districts of Long Island represent a microcosm of the range of districts in New York State as a whole. Among our member districts are the wealthiest school districts in the state along with the poorest; the largest district in the state outside of New York's "Big Five" city school districts, as well as the smallest; rural schools that deal with the problems of sparsity and small city schools that confront urban ills. While we can boast of some of the highest-achieving schools in the country, we cannot ignore our responsibility to our schools with high-needs populations.**

**A commonality shared by Long Island's disparate school districts is our citizens' support for their public schools. The high value Long Islanders place on their schools can be measured by their willingness, year after year, to vote for school budgets that reflect escalating costs and decreasing percentages of state aid.**

**This region absorbed the brunt of the state aid cutbacks at the onset of the state's fiscal crisis and most of our districts have yet to be restored to the levels of aid they received in 1989-90 (see attachment). Nonetheless, communities with comfortable commercial tax bases as well as those with little more than residential property to count on have rallied to protect their investment in their schools. The continued support of our voter taxpayers cannot be taken for granted. New York State must end its reliance on local property taxes as the major source of funding for its public education system.**

**Long Islanders' support for school budgets is not given blindly. Our well-earned recognition for quality education is the result of a demanding and questioning public. Parents and education advocates are constantly on guard to prevent the diminution of program and services. Citizens on fixed incomes and taxpayer advocates can be counted on to scrutinize proposed expenditures. They are assisted in these roles by ongoing published comparisons of test scores, graduation statistics, staff salaries, school budget increases and tax rate impacts.**

**School boards in Nassau and Suffolk do not make critical decisions in a vacuum. Strong community involvement has been the mainstay of their ability to withstand the seemingly unending attempts to further erode local control. Of late, the call for "accountability" seems to appear in every discourse on education. We defy anyone to produce a level of government that is more "accountable" than the locally elected school board. Board members face the ramifications of their decisions on a daily basis**

as they encounter students, neighbors and local citizens. They are virtually the only elected officials who run for re-election along with their budgets, asking for support from the very voters whose taxes they are increasing. It is with good reason that New York's Constitution entrusted to communities the control of local education decisions. With every governmental mandate, funded or unfunded; with every effort by the state to impose its will over that of local officials; with every move to standardize, categorize, and stigmatize schools and students, this well-placed trust in the local citizen is further diminished.

Since its founding in 1959, the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association has endeavored to advocate for the needs and concerns of the broad spectrum of our membership. In doing so, we have steadfastly refused to engage in the politics of pitting district against district or region against region.

In the course of your hearings you will have received input from the New York State School Boards Association, New York State Council of School Superintendents, New York State Association of School Business Officials as well as the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. Many of our Association's long-established state funding positions are reflected in the testimony of these organizations.

As you deliberate, we urge you to consider the following:

- The inequities established in the Court of appeals decision occur in districts across the state;
- The state's share of education costs must be increased. The local taxpayer can no longer continue to bear the major responsibility for funding New York's schools especially as unfunded mandates drive up school costs;
- State aid must keep pace with annual education cost increases;
- Equitable distribution of state aid to eliminate the disparity between high and low needs districts should be achieved by "leveling up", not by a "Robin Hood" solution;
- Regional cost variances must be recognized within any fair distribution formula;
- Regional wealth factors must be considered in the determination of ability to pay (property wealth, income wealth or combined wealth ratio);
- Additional state aid is but one factor for increasing the resources available to New York City's students. The city itself should be required to contribute additional local effort;
- "Save harmless" provisions should be retained. No district should see reductions in aid;
- Aid for enrollment growth should not be capped;
- New York's charter school legislation threatens fiscal stability of small suburban districts that are forced to forward taxpayer dollars to for-profit companies that are not held accountable to the voters;
- Quality public schools and well-educated students are the fuel that drives New York's economic engine. Short-changing education will have wide-spread and long-term repercussions.

**Reform of the state's funding of education has long been a priority issue of the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association. Our Legislation, Finance and Executive committees devote many hours each year analyzing state aid proposals. We are represented at the meetings of the Long Island Education Coalition, Hudson-Long Island Coalition for Fair Distribution of State Aid, State Aid Data Analysis and cooperate on state aid issues with the Nassau and Suffolk Councils of School Superintendents, Long Island Association of School Business Officials, R.E.F.I.T., Nassau and Suffolk Region PTAs as well as Nassau and Suffolk NYSUT. Our legislators hear from us often. We hope you will call upon us should you desire further background or information on our Association's positions.**