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An Advocacy Agenda for 2012 and Beyond

The members of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association (SCSSA) and the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents (NCCSS) have accepted the challenge of managing our region’s schools during these exceptionally difficult times. The state fiscal crisis continues to impact our schools. Over the past three years, school aid has been frozen or reduced as the state has struggled with falling revenues and rising costs. Even as state support has decreased, schools have managed to minimize property tax increases by controlling expenses, using reserves, and cutting back on services.

Throughout this difficult period, Long Island communities have supported their school districts. Only three school districts on Long Island have been forced to adopt a contingency budget as the result of a budget defeat over the last two years.

Unfortunately, the state’s difficulties do not appear to be subsiding. Recent revised budget estimates indicate that the deficit will be \$350 million higher this year than originally anticipated and \$3.5 billion next year.

As these circumstances persist, the SCSSA and NCCSS will continue to lead efforts to help school districts cope and make every effort to continue providing the outstanding public education that our children deserve and our communities expect.

In order to be successful, we all have to work together. We all have to be aware of the facts and be ready to stand up for our region. We cannot allow our success to become an excuse for reducing our already disproportionately low level of state support.

The SCSSA and NCCSS have an advocacy agenda that, if enacted, will smooth out some but not nearly all of the bumps in the road before us.

This brochure lays out the facts as well as the agenda we believe should be embraced by all Long Islanders.

Long Island: The Reality

Long Island is perceived as being uniformly affluent by many who influence state policy. However, the reality differs significantly from this perception. An examination of the facts indicates that while our schools continue to outperform the rest of the state, conditions do not match perceptions.

- Long Island students outperform their peers from across the rest of the state on every assessment administered by the State Education Department.
- Long Island schools eliminated 1,455 positions between 2010-11 and 2011-12, resulting in 773 staff members being laid off.
- Nearly 40% of the students on Long Island are enrolled in school districts that fall below the state wealth average (37.7%). Only 16% are enrolled in the wealthiest districts (CWR > 2.0).
- Due to higher regional costs, \$1 purchases only \$.65 worth of goods and services on Long Island, according to the SED cost index.
- Long Island's income wealth per pupil has dropped dramatically since 1999-2000, from nearly 40% to just 13% above the state average.
- New York State funds only \$1 of every \$5 spent on Long Island education (21.4%).
- If every penny of aid allocated to the wealthiest Long Island school districts were redistributed to the rest of the state, it would result in just a \$39 per pupil increase. These districts fund nearly 90% of their budgets with local property taxes.
- Over 20% of students on Long Island qualify for Free/Reduced Price Lunch according to federal guidelines.
- Between 2010-11 and 2011-12, the percentage of low-wealth school districts with an average class size over 25 grew from 15% to 25% at the elementary school level, 45% to 75% at the middle school level, and 60% to 75% at the high school level.
- One-third of low-wealth districts significantly (10%+) reduced career and technical education (CTE) opportunities for students, while one-fifth of these districts made similar cuts to alternative education programs.
- Long Island schools eliminated 235 Interscholastic Athletic Teams between 2010-11 and 2011-12.

State Aid

State aid for Long Island schools was cut by \$90 million between 2009-10 and 2010-11. In fact, our schools will receive less this year than they did five years ago. If as planned, school aid is increased in 2012-13, the following are our priorities for restoration:

- Fully fund all expense-driven formulas which offset school expenses and reduce the tax levy.
- Reduce the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) by applying an across-the-board minimum percentage aid increase, supplemented with a regionally adjusted, wealth-sensitive allocation.

The reality is that much more must be done. The Foundation Formula that drives nearly 80% of all state aid short changes our region's schools. The school aid formulas must be overhauled to assure that the "cost of doing business" in high-cost regions of the state is recognized.

Promote Sustainability

Structural change must occur in order to assure that our schools are sustainable. In order to preserve the excellence that our students deserve and our communities expect, laws and regulations must be modified to promote the following:

- Authorize an expanded role for teacher assistants, or a team of teacher assistants, to provide instructional services under the direction of a master teacher. Schools can be staffed differently today than in the past.
- Establish a regionally sensitive statewide collective bargaining agreement for teachers. Teaching personnel across the state should have common working conditions and patterns of compensation.
- Change staffing requirements to maximize cost savings resulting from the expanded use of technology to provide instructional services.
- Evaluate the long-term impact of Tier 5 and consider the creation of Tier 6 if warranted.
- Establish a separate funding mechanism for charter schools. Public schools should not be the source of funds for charter school businesses.
- Provide meaningful financial incentives to promote school district consolidation.

Mandate Relief

State mandates drive local school costs. Mandate relief has been promised, but not delivered. The SCSSA and NCCSS join the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents (LHCSS) in supporting the mandate relief proposals:

- Require a “review” of new mandates that includes a comprehensive cost analysis and the definitive funding source
- Freeze and review all currently proposed and pending mandates
- Fund or reduce mileage limits (15 to 5 miles) for private school out-of-district transportation
- Allow consolidation of services under established contracts
- Limit special education out-of-district transportation when Free Appropriate Education is provided
- Allow districts to establish TRS reserve fund
- Legislate pension reform/TRS contribution restoration (pre 1998)
- Establish a 55/25 “exit clause” for Tier 3/4 members who are 55 and older (in 2011) to create “entry” opportunities for new Tier 5 and “6” TRS contributors
- Cap/control health care premium costs with a statewide plan and limited employer contributions
- Utilize federal class size standards for students with disabilities and resource rooms while maintaining a continuum of services and supports for students
- Amend Education Law 3602 that creates entitlement to special education for students parentally placed in private schools, and cap district contributions to out-of-district placements while ensuring that comparable programs are offered by the district of residence
- Eliminate the requirement that an individual evaluation includes specific assessments as prescribed by Education Law 4402(1)9b(3)(a)
- Amend the law (A.5396-A/S.5972-A;Chapter 583) that shifted the burden of proof from parents to schools and that is counter to the 2007 Supreme Court decision

