

# Our Children, Our Schools, Our Future

## ADVOCACY TOOLKIT



As an urban school district, Syracuse's budget relies heavily on State Aid to support improved educational outcomes for all of its 21,000 students. Syracuse's combined property and income wealth is less than one third that of the average New York State school district. The district's pupil demographics, coupled with its wealth measures, highlight its reliance on the State for adequate funding. This year, State Aid comprises nearly 80% of the funding for the local operating budget.

*Advocates give a voice to the issues, people and principles they care about.*

**Your voice can make a difference!**

Syracuse received an overall State Aid increase of \$2.7 million (less than 1%) in Governor Cuomo's proposed 2014-15 budget. This is simply not enough. An expected pension rate increase of 8% will absorb the entire amount of the State Aid increase, leaving no new financial resources to support the strategic initiatives aimed at improving student outcomes. After factoring in the Gap Elimination Adjustment, Foundation is still less than it was in 2008-09. However, overall spending has increased over the past six years, primarily driven by double digit percentage increases in pension and health care costs.

Without additional funding, the District will face a deficit of \$7 million, even after it makes significant expense reductions and exhausts its fund balance.

Continued reductions are not a viable long-term solution when today's students and teachers must meet higher performance standards than those for any previous generation. **This trend of reductions cannot continue without threatening the quality –and equality – of the education available to all students.**

The Syracuse community must speak up *now*, on behalf of their students and their schools. **Thank you for being an advocate who stands up for our children, our schools, our future.**



# How can I be an advocate for Syracuse schools?

## Action Step #1

**Learn about the issues affecting Syracuse schools.**

### 1. Potential Budget Deficit of \$7 million

- The Governor's Executive budget proposes an overall State Aid increase of \$2.7 million. Unfortunately, this increase is inadequate to meet the overwhelming needs in the Syracuse City School District. Without additional funding, the district will face a deficit of \$7 million, even after it makes significant expense reductions and exhausts its fund balance.
- **Ask the State legislative bodies to consider increasing Syracuse's Foundation Aid by \$7 million to avoid having to make further devastating cuts to staffing and programs. In addition to an increase in state aid, ask that the Gap Elimination Adjustment be eliminated and the funding be reallocated to high-need districts like Syracuse.**

### 2. Support for Flexible Universal Full-Day Pre-Kindergarten

- Currently, there are 1,400 students enrolled in SCSD Pre-K programs in both district and agency classrooms. There are approximately 200 children currently on the waiting list for Pre-K seats who are seeking full-day placements. The district is ready to expand Pre-K capacity by 450 full-time seats in both district and agency classrooms. The estimated investment is \$5.1 million.
- **Ask your legislators to support flexible Universal full-day Pre-K funding to allow Syracuse to serve more children.**

### 3. Raise the Cap for Special Services Aid

- Special Services Aid funds the Career and Technical Educational (CTE) courses. Syracuse is implementing a multi-year plan for providing rigorous, high-quality CTE and Science, Technology, Math and Engineering (STEM) programs throughout the district. The current cap limits the district's ability to drive more aid for these expanded programs.

- **Ask the State legislative bodies to support raising this cap on funding to enable us to increase qualified workers in New York's high-need, high-growth industries and dramatically increase our graduation rate.**

### 4. No immediate gain from Smart Schools Bond Act

- According to the Executive Aid Runs, the Smart Schools allocation for Syracuse would total over \$27 million. **However, we are concerned that the Smart Schools proposal distracts from the district's immediate need for additional operating aid for core programs in the 2014-2015 school year.**

### 5. Immediate Need for Extended Learning Time Programs in 2014-2015 not 2015-2016

- The Syracuse City School District is partnering with local cultural institutions and universities to provide unique and meaningful enrichment opportunities during extended learning time at the cost of approximately \$500,000 per school per year in 12 extended learning time schools.
- **Ask that the cost for additional staff time and enrichment instruction be immediately funded in 2014-2015 in order to provide our students with a world-class education.**

### 6. Additional Resources for Common Core Professional Development

- Implementation of the Common Core requires a professional development investment in our teachers and leaders. A minimum of 25 hours of professional development must be guaranteed to each teacher next year.
- **Ask for your legislators' support for funding \$1.5 million in professional development for SCSD educators.**

## Action Step #2

### *Develop a “laser talk.”*

Deliver your messages more effectively by telling gripping stories in brief presentations known as “laser talks.”

#### **Identify the Problem**

- In your laser talk, focus first on identifying a problem you want your listener to know about. Try to connect the problem to an issue the listener already cares about.

#### **Present a Solution**

- Next, inform the listener about a solution to the problem you just presented. Give examples of how the solution would work and why it would be effective. You might cite a recent study or use other credible statistics.

#### **Issue a call to Action**

- The final section of the laser talk is the call to action. Calls to action should be concrete, specific and include a “yes” or “no” question.

#### **Work in a personal story**

- Try to include a compelling, personal story that expands on your laser talk.

## Action Step #3

### *Write letters or emails to your legislators.*

Legislators often report that their inaction on an issue is simply because not enough people contacted them about it. Writing a letter is a simple way to ensure your legislators know how you want to be represented. When writing a letter:

- *Include the same points that you refined in your laser talk. The letter should include an introduction, problem statement, proposed solution, conclusion and call to action.*
- *Keep your letter or email short; a single page letter is best.*
- *Be concise and specific, but add a personal touch.*

## Action Step #4

### *Develop a relationship with your legislators’ aides.*

Sometimes knowing legislators’ aides can be just as valuable as knowing the legislators. Aides often have a great deal of influence on the assembly members and senators for whom they work as well as more time to devote to your concerns. Try to build great relationships with these essential staff members.

## Action Step #5

### *Meet face to face with your legislators.*

Ideally, your first meeting with a legislator should be before a problem arises. It’s also best to schedule a personal meeting in a legislator’s local district office. Keep in mind these additional tips for an effective meeting:

- **Be on time.** Legislators have full schedules and may not be available if you arrive late.
- **Be concise.** Stick to your message, and expect no more than 15 minutes for a meeting.
- **Be flexible.** If your legislator is late or can’t attend, convey the same message you had planned to deliver to the legislator’s aide.
- **Be pleasant and appreciative.** Niceness and a bit of humor can make your visit memorable.
- **Be passionate, not emotional.** Emotional pleas often make others uncomfortable.
- **Be prepared.** Make sure you understand the arguments in opposition to your issue and have talking points prepared to combat them. Answer any questions your legislator may have and promise to follow up if you don’t immediately have an answer available. Have some materials that are relevant to your issue to leave behind.
- **Be personal—about your issue.** Speak with passion about local children, local jobs, the local economy, local taxes, etc.

# How can I make a difference for students?

Concerned citizens often wonder what they can do to help their local students and schools.

**The answer:** Complete one or more of the items on the Advocacy Checklist below.

Then encourage friends and family to do the same.

## Advocacy Checklist

### ➤ Empower yourself

- Choose an issue affecting your local schools and learn about that issue (*Action Step #1*).
- Hone and deliver a “laser talk” to someone about the issue you chose (*Action Step #2*).

### ➤ Advocate with your legislators

- Send a letter or email to local legislators (*Action Step #3*).
- Establish a relationship with legislators’ aides (*Action Step #4*).
- Schedule face-to-face meetings with legislators, and ask them to take a leadership role on your selected issue (*Action Step #5*).
- Invite legislators to special events at schools.
- Ask questions at legislators’ town hall meetings.

### ➤ Advocate through the media

- Write a letter to a newspaper editor and send your published letter to local legislators.
- Copy editorials or newspaper articles about your issue and send them to local legislators.

### ➤ Advocate in the community

- Organize a letter-writing campaign.
- Speak to a local Community group.
- Participate in a forum on your selected issue.
- Use social media to spread the word about what you’re advocating for:
  - Update your Facebook or Twitter status with a key point from your “laser talk.”
  - Share links to relevant news articles or to your school district website.
  - Invite people to participate in events that are related to your selected issue.

## How can I have a good discussion with a legislator?

Follow these tips to engage in productive back-and-forth discussions with legislators, even when you don’t agree on the issues.

- **Be brief.** Stick to your key points, and legislators will appreciate your respect for their busy schedules.
- **Be respectful, but also confident and direct.** A thoughtful discussion gives both sides an opportunity to come to an agreement, while a divisive argument makes both sides just want to win. So keep it civil while standing up for your beliefs.
- **Be clear and specific.** Let legislators know exactly what you want them to do (e.g., vote in favor of a bill, sponsor legislation) in a way that requires them to give you a “yes” or “no” response.
- **Be accurate.** Research your issue so you can answer legislators’ questions. Promise to follow up on any question for which you don’t immediately have an answer.
- **Be honest about your concerns.** Paint the real picture of your situation, even if it is scary. Share the ramifications for your community’s schools and children. Use personal or compelling stories and facts.
- **Be timely and persistent.** If an issue has a deadline, make sure you give legislators enough time to respond to the issue. Regular reminders about the importance of the issue from multiple advocates can increase the likelihood that legislators will pay attention to the issue.

# How do I contact my elected officials?

## **N.Y.S. Senator John A. DeFrancisco**

### **50<sup>th</sup> Senate District Office**

800 State Office Bldg.  
333 East Washington Street  
Syracuse, NY 13202  
(315) 428-7632

Email: [jdefranc@nysenate.gov](mailto:jdefranc@nysenate.gov)

[www.facebook.com/pages/Senator-John-A-DeFrancisco/8776617150](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Senator-John-A-DeFrancisco/8776617150)

Twitter: @JohnDeFrancisco

## **N.Y.S. Senator David J. Valesky**

### **53<sup>rd</sup> Senate District Office**

333 East Washington St., Rm 805  
Syracuse, NY 13202  
(315) 478-8745

Email: [valesky@nysenate.gov](mailto:valesky@nysenate.gov)

[www.facebook.com/SenValesky](http://www.facebook.com/SenValesky)

Twitter: @SenDaveValesky

## **Assemblyman William B. Magnarelli**

### **129th District Office**

333 East Washington St., Room 840  
Syracuse, NY 13202  
(315) 428-9651

Email: [MagnarW@assembly.state.ny.us](mailto:MagnarW@assembly.state.ny.us)

[www.facebook.com/william.magnarelli](http://www.facebook.com/william.magnarelli)

## **Assemblyman Samuel D. Roberts**

### **128th District Office**

711 East Genesee St., Suite 2  
Syracuse, NY 13210-1540  
(315) 449-9536

Email: [RobertsS@assembly.state.ny.us](mailto:RobertsS@assembly.state.ny.us)

## **Governor Andrew M. Cuomo**

N.Y. State Capitol Building,  
Albany, NY 12224  
(518) 474-8390

Email: [Andrew.cuomo@exec.ny.gov](mailto:Andrew.cuomo@exec.ny.gov)

[www.facebook.com/GovernorAndrewCuomo](http://www.facebook.com/GovernorAndrewCuomo)

Twitter: @NYGovCuomo

### *Chair of the New York State Senate*

#### *Education Committee:*

## **Senator John J. Flanagan**

Room 805 LOB, Albany, NY 12247  
(518) 455-2071

Email: [Flanagan@nysenate.gov](mailto:Flanagan@nysenate.gov)

[www.facebook.com/SenatorJohnFlanagan](http://www.facebook.com/SenatorJohnFlanagan)

### *Chair of the New York State Assembly*

#### *Education Committee:*

## **Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan**

Room 836 LOB, Albany, NY 12248  
(518) 455-4851

Email: [nolanc@assembly.state.ny.us](mailto:nolanc@assembly.state.ny.us)

### *Chairwoman of the New York State*

#### *Association of Black and Puerto Rican*

#### *Legislators:*

## **Assemblymember Crystal D. Peoples-Stokes**

Room 619 LOB, Albany, NY 12248  
(518) 455-5005

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