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Aníbal Soler, Jr.
Superintendent of Schools

Good afternoon, Chairpersons Krueger, Pretlow, Mayer, Benedetto, distinguished members of the committees, and of course the Yonkers state delegation,

My name is Anibal Soler, Jr. the proud Superintendent of Yonkers Public Schools and I thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of Yonkers Public Schools and the 24,000 students that I proudly serve.

Before I begin, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to our Yonkers state delegation for their unwavering advocacy and steadfast support over the years. Your dedication to the students, families, and educators of Yonkers Public Schools has played a critical role in our success. Your efforts have laid the foundation for what has become a remarkable story of progress.

My message today is simple: *Protect Our Progress. Protect The Investment. Protect Yonkers Public Schools.*

I may be new to Yonkers Public Schools, but this isn't a new problem. Year after year, Yonkers comes before this legislature with the same issue. This isn't about a failure in leadership; it's about having the vision to fix a broken and flawed funding formula.

Yonkers is a success story. We are New York's 3rd largest school system, and we lead the Big 5 urban districts with a 90% graduation rate amongst many other positive academic indicators - a remarkable achievement that reflects the dedication of our students, teachers, and families. This milestone has earned national attention; in fact, the Obama Foundation named us as the only school district in the country to be a model community for graduating young men of color at a high rate. This proves that with the right resources and leadership, urban schools can thrive.

But today, I'm here to sound the alarm: this progress and investment is at significant risk.

We're facing a \$68 million budget gap – a structural deficit which we simply cannot solve on our own. While we have minimal reserves, using them entirely to close this gap would be reckless. Reserves are meant for emergencies, like a building roof collapse or other unforeseen crises a school district might face.

Last year, we received \$12 million in one-time bullet aid, which we appreciate, but it is not reoccurring funding. Last year when faced with teacher layoffs we received a \$5 million dollar loan which in turn, turned into debt that we now must pay back. Without a long-term solution, we will be back here again next year – and every year after – facing the same challenges. And next year we will be back with no reserve funds to lean on.

Last year, we also made tough decisions and eliminated 100 positions and closed two schools. Now, we are seeing the impact in our classrooms and on the quality of education we can provide. As an example, the current ratio of students to counselors in our district is one school counselor to serve every 500 students.

If we're forced to cut further, the results will be devastating to the experience of students and the academic outcomes of the school system:

- Reduction of staff. This would include art, music, foreign language teachers, along with guidance counselors and other critical social emotional support staff.
- Rightsizing schools that would disrupt families and communities.
- The elimination of after-school programs, sports, and arts – activities that are crucial for our students' growth and development.
- Limited access to technology and innovation for students.

These cuts will hit directly at the heart of what has made Yonkers a success. They would jeopardize the graduation rate we have worked so hard to achieve and weaken the future we have built for our kids.

The current funding formula simply does not reflect Yonkers' unique challenges or compare us fairly to other large urban districts. I've worked in three of the Big 5 districts – Yonkers, Buffalo, and Rochester – and I've seen firsthand how resources are distributed. Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse, the state covers nearly all education costs. Meanwhile, Yonkers relies heavily on a growing maintenance of effort from local city taxpayers, contributing \$498 million dollars over the past 13 years.

Despite these challenges, Yonkers continues to lead the way. We're the only urban district in the Big 5 to hit 90% graduation rates. But the current disparity in funding isn't sustainable. It's not fair to our students, it's not fair to our staff and it's not fair to our community.

The Foundation Aid formula penalizes Yonkers because we're in Westchester County, where property values are high. But our costs – closely aligned with New York City – far exceed the funding we receive. Adjusting the regional cost index to reflect reality could bring \$22 million dollars more annually into our schools – critical funding that would go directly to classrooms.

Adding to our challenges are unfunded mandates like the heat index bill and proposed policies like the state-wide cell phone ban. These ideas may have good intentions, but they don't come with the funding needed to implement them. For example, the heat index bill requires schools to address extreme heat, but there's no funding to install air conditioning or improve ventilation in older buildings like ours that have an average age of 80 years old.

The proposed cell phone ban is a clear example of an unfunded mandate with additional requirements on school districts. The \$13.5 million allocated state-wide for implementation isn't nearly enough to support all districts, especially those already stretched thin. Mandates like this place an unfair burden on schools like Yonkers, forcing us to divert resources away from the classroom.

In the spirit of implementing changes, I applaud the New York State Education Department for the updates in the graduation measures, which will provide more pathways for students to demonstrate their learning. While these changes will benefit students, they will require new programs, teacher training, and additional support for students – investments we simply can't afford without the required funding.

If the state wants schools to implement these initiatives successfully, it must provide the resources to back them up. Asking schools to do more with less isn't fair to our students or staff.

This is about fairness. Yonkers is a model urban school system. Yonkers serves as the gold standard for New York State of what is possible in a highly diverse urban community. Our students deserve to have the same funding and opportunities as their peers in Westchester County and the other Big 5. Let's not punish them for achieving more with less. Instead, I ask you again to *Protect Our Progress. Protect the Investment. Protect Yonkers Public Schools.*

I urge you to address this gap and invest in Yonkers Public Schools. Fix the funding formula and fund a learning environment that doesn't bankrupt our students from an educational experience like the districts that surround us. Let us ensure that the students in Yonkers have a fair chance to succeed and thrive. Let's guarantee they have, at minimum, access to a school counselor, an art teacher, a librarian, and the many other things we take for granted in our schools. Let us fund a school experience for our students that you all can be proud of, one that rewards and honors our achievement and protects it.

Thank you for your time and attention. I welcome your questions.