

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

A Welcoming Congregation

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October 7, 2020

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo
Executive Chamber
The Capitol
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

We, the Social Responsibilities Council of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, write to you in support of our neighboring schoolchildren in the City School District of Albany. Our congregation has long been involved in supporting Sheridan Preparatory Academy, with whom we have partnered to provide volunteer classroom assistance, tutoring, housing support for families of homeless students, and financial support, including the funding and construction of a playground. We are deeply concerned about the impact of recent withholding of state aid to the District on these children, many of whom come from marginalized families who have already suffered disproportionately from the COVID-19 pandemic. While we recognize the unprecedented strain upon the state budget wrought by the pandemic, we beseech you to use your authority to mitigate these impacts and ensure that they do not fall disproportionately upon these vulnerable children.

The Albany District, like districts across the State, has faced substantial additional COVID-related costs, and was initially disadvantaged in the state budget when school aid was reduced by the amount of aid in the federal CARES act. This was, of course, contrary to the intent of the federal bill to provide *supplemental* aid to schools to address these specific needs. Then in August, 18 days before the start of school, DOB reported that 20% of monthly aid payments had been withheld. Given dire prognostications of a \$62 billion revenue shortfall over four years and without further guidance from the State, the District understandably and prudently made painful cuts in spending, in order to avoid the necessity of even deeper cuts later in the school year. Their plight was in no way alleviated by the Budget Director's public characterization of those cuts as premature and bland assurance to "ensure school district need is accounted for in any actions going forward." The District has written to the Budget Director requesting specificity with respect to future "withholding" or aid reductions (with or without additional federal aid), and to date has received no response.

Besides providing more specificity about future aid reductions, there are a number of steps that you as Governor could take to reduce the disparate impact of cuts on high-needs districts such as Albany. We ask you to:

1. Distribute reductions equitably. Due to the built-in inequity of current school aid distribution, a uniform 20% reduction among all districts compounds the inequity suffered by high-needs districts. A 20% reduction in aid to the Albany District would equate to a loss of \$2,100 per pupil, compared to as little as \$400 in a wealthy district. All withholdings or reductions must be applied in proportion to districts' reliance on state aid.
2. Impose reductions equitably on charter schools. The Albany District, home to a large number of charter schools, expends \$35 million annually in payments to them. There is no justification for holding charter schools harmless and depriving the District of that \$7 million.
3. Tap the State Reserve Fund. It is difficult to imagine more of a "rainy day" than what the children of the Albany District are currently facing. We ask that you direct some of the \$3.7 billion in state reserves to alleviate the catastrophe in our State's high-need school districts.
4. Support increased taxation of New York's wealthiest residents. There are currently a number of legislative proposals for additional tax on the wealthy, including the Jackson/Rosenthal bill that would direct revenue from an increased rate on income over \$1 million to school aid. These are small increases that would barely be felt by the affected taxpayers, and your signaled support would surely lead to swift passage in the Legislature.

Governor, you have voiced support for Black Lives Matter and reforms that would promote economic justice in our State. We know you understand the vital importance of public education in promoting escape from the cycles of poverty endured by people of color in Albany and elsewhere in New York. Our neighboring children are victims of generations of inequitable school funding, and it is truly heartbreaking to see how their disproportionate suffering during the pandemic is being exacerbated by the loss of essential school resources. You have demonstrated great leadership during this health crisis, which we fervently hope you will now also apply to alleviate the compounding impact of reduced school aid.

Sincerely,

s/

Jean E. Poppei, Chair
Social Responsibilities Council