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Statement of the New York State Council of School Superintendents on passage of the 2015-16 New York State Budget

ALBANY – Last night our Assemblymembers and Senators had to make difficult choices in voting to approve the education portion of the new state budget. Perfection is seldom one of the options in public policy. The budget presents some challenges for schools, but includes positive elements too.

We know our lawmakers say “no” to many people with worthy causes in order to say “yes” as much as they do each year to aid for our public schools. We are grateful for that support. The overall School Aid increase of \$1.3 billion makes the end of the Gap Elimination Adjustment a distinct probability for next year and offers promise that the state will accelerate rebuilding the Foundation Aid formula.

The budget includes reforms proposed by Governor Cuomo and long sought by district leaders to streamline the process for removing educators who truly do not belong in the profession.

Measures adopted in the budget to extend teacher and principal tenure for an additional year, reaffirm districts’ authority to make employment decisions regarding probationary educators, as well as reform the tenured employee dismissal process will have a positive effect on school districts’ ability to manage and retain the best staff.

The Governor also recommended an aggressive strategy for state intervention in under-performing schools led by state-appointed “receivers.” The Legislature modified that proposal to increase accountability of receivers to local officials and voters. The final budget also gives local leaders tools and time to improve their schools before full state intervention is imposed.

Our greatest concerns with the adopted budget relate to changes in Annual Professional Performance Reviews (APPR), the state’s system for teacher and principal evaluations. These changes will reverberate in every classroom in our state.

The new evaluation law will require districts to negotiate changes to their APPR plans with local unions by November 15 or face losing state aid. Mandating districts to negotiate their original APPR plans under that threat forced compromises that created some of the defects the Governor has condemned in current plans.

Under the new APPR, districts will also be mandated to use outside professionals to observe classroom teachers and principals, in addition to their actual supervisors. This will be a costly and complex mandate for schools to administer. It will also undermine one success story of the state’s recent education reforms: schools have become more careful in conducting observations, producing more value as a result and helping to improve instruction.

The budget will also attach more consequences to the results of APPR evaluations. It would require new teachers to earn three effective or highly effective ratings in four years in order to qualify for tenure as well as link APPR evaluations to seniority within “failing” schools and to teacher pay bonuses. With part of the evaluation tied to student test results, we foresee some APPR changes will compound the stress over testing already growing across our state.

Overall, there is a lot of good that can come from some elements adopted in this budget. There are others that provoke considerable concern.

We thank lawmakers for providing important funding for the students of New York’s public schools.

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