December 13, 2010

The Honorable Andrew Cuomo, Governor-Elect  
State of New York  
Executive Chamber, Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor-elect Cuomo:

On behalf of the more than 5,000 locally elected school board members statewide, the New York State School Boards Association congratulates you on your election as the 56th Governor of the State of New York. It is a long-standing tradition of our 114 year old association to write to our governor each year as budget preparations begin. Although we recognize that the constitution provides you with more time to prepare your first Executive Budget Proposal, there is little else that is traditional about this year. The citizens of our great state continue to suffer the unrelenting hurtful consequences of the Great Recession and we continue to face the challenges of making difficult decisions under some of the most fiscally distressed times in recent memory.

Regardless of political party or position we believe that we all want the same thing for school children. In fact, it is vital to our growth, prosperity and well-being and in the interest of everyone that our children are well educated and prepared to contribute as productive citizens of New York State. For our part, as elected community leaders, our members have worked to ensure a sound basic education and to meet the expectations of improved student achievement without overburdening our property taxpayers. To the best of our ability we have pursued aggressive and innovative cost containment measures, and looked to ensure that valuable resources are used in the most efficient manner as we strive to improve the achievement gap and the state’s graduation rates. We are proud that over the past several years, school taxes and spending have risen at rates far below those of the state and other municipalities. Rather than mere supporters of the status quo, you will find NYSSBA and school board members eager partners in the quest for innovative and fundamental change in public education.

The public continues to support their schools. In 2010 over 97% of school budget votes passed. But there is much work to be done. You have toured the state not just as a candidate but as the governor-elect and seen firsthand the crying need for equitable and adequate school funding. You know the educational and fiscal challenges we face as we address this crisis. We simply cannot succeed in our mission of achieving public educational excellence without state support and collaboration. While we do not agree with all of your advance proposals, we wholeheartedly agree that our state’s future is dependent on difficult choices and strategic policy decisions that will fundamentally alter the status quo. We implore your consideration of the following on behalf of a generation of New York’s children who will bear the consequences of the choices we, as New York’s public educational policy makers, make today.
Given the severity of this ongoing fiscal crisis, we understand you face a decision to protract the promised state school aid increases necessary to achieve adequacy. We fervently ask you to not exacerbate current funding inadequacies; that the principles of funding reform be preserved. We would also request that you protect the future opportunities of the children in those school districts where the state has failed to meet its constitutional duty to assure an adequate opportunity to a sound basic education. Further, we implore you to refrain from binding our hands with a school property tax cap as we strive to fulfill our critical mission of raising necessary local revenues in the face of deteriorating state support. We believe there are better ways of providing our tax payers with much needed relief through long called-for policy alternatives necessary to holding down costs and spending. We urge you to consider the devastation a tax cap would impose under the current conditions of decreased state aid and the elimination of federal stimulus dollars, starting with the evisceration of our poorest and neediest community public schools. To impose a ceiling on our public schools as our funding floor is pulled away leaves schools with no option other than to gut their programs and personnel. In an era of increased interstate and international educational competition, such action would not support sound, long term planning.

We also ask that your administration honor the repayment of expenses already legally incurred by school districts (with the expectation of subsequent reimbursement by the state) so local property taxpayers are not once again left to accept state responsibilities. Together we all must guard against the shifting of new unfunded responsibilities onto the backs of school property taxpayers.

Difficult financial times provide rich opportunities for systemic improvement (and the political impetus for change) just as they demand strength and the political will of principled leadership. New York’s elected school board members cannot think of a better time to finally allow school districts to operate free of outdated and burdensome state strictures. Our school boards and property taxpayers need relief from externally imposed mandates that unnecessarily drive up the cost of providing a sound education. Two years ago, we issued our report on Maximizing School District Resources outlining 55 ways local school boards and state officials could save on the costs schools are currently required to pay. This year we worked extensively and constructively with a number of Governor Paterson’s departments to advance the recommendations contained therein. We urge serious and genuine discussion of items that increase local flexibility to drive greater efficiencies. More importantly, we urge action! Implementation of these measures would be more effective than a property tax cap in restraining school spending, while addressing the economic need for a highly educated state population. A penny saved is a penny unappropriated. New York State’s taxpayers can simply no longer afford the legislative largesse that hampers the efficient operation of our schools.

Given current circumstances, we must remove the barriers and wasteful impediments to savings for taxpayers. Allow us to share services by providing the technical and programmatic assistance needed to facilitate significant operational reform. In this respect, we are not asking for a hand out but a hand up. We stand ready to do our part to conserve precious resources, but counsel you that this task should not simply focus on cutbacks when so many opportunities for systemic reform now present themselves. Let’s work together to tackle the changes needed, letting go of outdated costs and practices that we can no longer afford. We want you to succeed, but most especially we want success for our children and a fair deal for the taxpayers that support our schools.

I have enclosed a copy of our priority issues. Each of these issues is intended to make schools more efficient and more effective. I urge you and your staff to review these suggestions for improving both our schools and our state’s fiscal circumstances. Local school districts are best positioned to allocate limited resources in an efficient manner. Now more than ever, school districts recognize their responsibility to optimize those limited
resources in maximizing the benefit to their children, while minimizing the financial impact on their communities. The state must give democratically elected local school officials the authority to promote cost efficiencies in major areas, including health care, liability insurance, energy, school construction, special education and personnel, as well as removing restrictions that prevent shared services and economical purchasing.

As it has for over a century, NYSSBA stands ready to assist our state’s leaders in ways large and small to improve and reform public education in New York State. We understand the daunting nature of the challenges before us and whenever possible, we will be your partner in guiding our state to a new, more effective and more efficient means of fulfilling this, our state’s most important obligation. Thank you for your kind consideration and for your anticipated support.

Sincerely,

Timothy G. Kremer
Executive Director

Enclosure