



***Testimony of
New York State Congress of Parents & Teachers
(NYS Parent Teacher Association)***

By

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***NYS Education Budget
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I am Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky, the Executive Director of the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. (NYS PTA), and am proud to represent nearly 300,000 members of NYS PTA and the parents of 2.6 million New York school children. I am honored to be joined by our State President Lorey Zaman, and Roberto Rijos, President of Yonkers Council of PTAs.

NYS PTA appreciates the opportunity to comment on how the Executive Budget impacts children and families statewide.

Thank you to Assembly Finance Chair Weinstein, Senate Finance Chair Krueger, Senate Education Chair Shelley Mayer, Assembly Education Chair Benedetto, and members of the Senate and Assembly for your continued commitment to ALL children, their families, and our schools.

Our student's needs are changing. Each day they face new obstacles to success: homelessness, poverty, mental health concerns, and language and learning barriers. And yet, our schools continue to support every child as they grow to successful citizens.

Did you know that students with disabilities comprise approximately 18% of our student population, more than half of our students qualify for free or reduced price lunch, and we have more than 230,000 English Language Learners (ELL) who speak more than 200 languages.

It is our job to ensure that every child, no matter their zip code, race, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation or gender identity is fully supported.

EDUCATION ISSUES

School Aid

The state constitutional obligation to fund a high-quality education for each and every New York student remains unfilled. Unfortunately, state aid as allocated in the Executive Budget proposal is insufficient to address student need.

The \$504 million increase in Foundation Aid, \$200 million allocation for high-needs Foundation Aid, and \$72 million for expense-based aid is much less than half of the \$2.1 billion school aid increase called for by NYS PTA and other educational advocates.

According to conservative calculations by the NYS PTA and Educational Conference Board, our students and schools need:

- \$1.6 billion increase in Foundation Aid, which is a third of what is due to schools. This would put the state on course to fully fund the formula in three years; and
- \$500 million for five priority areas, including strengthening school safety, supporting struggling schools and English language learners and investing in college and career pathways.

NYS PTA strongly supports a commitment to fully phase in the previously promised Foundation Aid of nearly \$4 billion over the next immediate years. We have been asking for a true full phase-in of foundation aid for many years. Sadly, the overwhelming majority of these funds are still due to high-needs school districts and students.

A commitment must be made to both update and fully phase in the foundation aid, with a special focus on revisiting formulas for poverty, and other critical factors such as percentage of students with disabilities, ELL and homeless enrollment, geographic sparsity and enrollment growth. ALL students, and especially in our high-needs schools, need adequate support.

We strongly oppose any changes to expense-based aids, and fully oppose the Executive's proposal to change expense-based aids, which would lessen resources available to schools.

Expense-based aids are a critical and necessary funding stream for many schools – especially since many school buildings are old, and in dire need of repair. Replacing outdated school buses, repairing plumbing and heating, and updating equipment is absolutely necessary, as schools have deferred these and other expenses to save programs and direct services for students. These expenses are essential, not selective, and must continue to be fully funded.

Further, we must continue “save harmless” for school districts with declining enrollment, and continue to oppose any cost shifts to school districts.

English Language Learners and their Families

New York continues to be a gateway for immigrant success. According to the NYS Student Information Repository System, well over 60% of New York's ELL students were born in the United States. While New York ELLs frequently speak Spanish, Chinese, Haitian, Korean or Russian, there are astoundingly over 210 different languages spoken by our nearly 300,000 ELL students.

We urge continued investments in our ELL students and their families, as adequately supporting ELL students and their families continues to be a challenge for many districts and communities. We ask you to support:

1. Creation of a \$100 million ELL aid category to ensure districts can deliver the enhanced levels of service necessary for ELL success;
2. Improve current aid to address mid-year influxes of unaccompanied minor students and support for districts with high ELL populations;
3. Fiscal support for Part 154 implementation and requirements;
4. Accelerate teacher training for all educators in supporting ELL students and their families, along with expedited certification of bilingual and TESOL educators, and incentives for those in teacher prep programs to become certified to teach ELL students;
5. Increase support for the State Education Department Office of Family Engagement, with staff dedicated to support ELL students;
6. Expansion of the state's capacity to provide translation and interpretation services, especially for key parent documents; and
7. Adjustment of funding structures for BOCES aid to help offset new costs associated with providing ELL services and commensurate resources for non-component school districts.

Funding for Family Engagement and Community Schools

Family Engagement is a school-family partnership that raises student achievement, improves school and community relations, and increases public support for our schools. We continue to support a dedicated funding stream for high-quality school-based collaborative family engagement.

We are pleased with the continued investment in the My Brother's Keeper program; however more support is needed for a statewide systematic approach to ensure meaningful family engagement initiatives in ALL school buildings. We also continue to support community school models, and strongly believe that ALL schools should be afforded the opportunity to transform schools into community hubs for learning. With fully phased-in Foundation Aid, more schools would be able to leverage resources to consider converting to a Community School.

Our Youngest Learners

All children should have complete and equal access to high-quality pre-school and kindergarten educational opportunities.

Parents and families play an integral role in pre-school, and high-quality programs must include attention to the unique developmental nature of the social/emotional, physical and academic experience of young children in a manner that addresses the whole child.

We must also remember that play is critical for child development, especially at young ages. NYS PTA fully supports at least 20 minutes of non-instructional recess time, separate and apart from mandated physical education time, each day for all grades.

In the Executive Budget, NYS PTA fully supports:

- The \$5 million investment in the implementation of QUALITYstarsNY;
- The \$15 million increase in pre-kindergarten funding to expand programming for three and four year olds; and

- True universal pre-kindergarten for all public school students, with necessary transportation funding.

One district without full-day kindergarten, or one district without universal pre-k, is one too many. In a time of fluctuating revenues, districts may be forced to offer half day or no kindergarten if they experience fiscal distress. We must not let this occur.

We also support the investment in the Empire State Afterschool Program of \$10 million.

Early College High Schools, AP and IB Access, and CTE

By providing predictable funding for Early College High Schools, CTE and STEM programs, New York is investing in both the economic future of our state and our children, as more than 90 percent of CTE students graduate with a Regents diploma.

NYS PTA fully supports the increases to expand Early College High School programs and P-Tech/Early High School programs. We also support the increases to subsidize AP and IB exams for low-income students. These proposals would begin to level the playing field and provide for appropriate assistance to low-income families to support children in their preparation for college or career.

Mental Health Support for Students

A recent New York State Council of School Superintendents survey found two-thirds of chief school officers identify mental health services as a top funding priority, up from 52% the previous year. Improving mental health services was overwhelmingly the most widely cited priority for educators.

Thankfully last school year, mental health was added to the current mandated health education curriculum. NYS PTA proudly continues to serve on the Mental Health Advisory Council, who worked on guidance for implementation of this new mental health curriculum.

However, schools cannot accomplish this task alone. Our students and educators need support.

We call on policymakers to include at least \$5 million for direct support of school-based mental health programs in non-competitive funding. We also support the inclusion of funding for non-competitive student mental health services in the \$16 million block grant.

Further, adequate increases in Foundation Aid could support critical personnel like school counselors, health professionals such as school nurses, school psychologists and clinical licensed social workers – who work not only to address mental health concerns, but also identify behavioral issues, develop individual child plans, and can be a positive support system for the academic setting, family and community.

We must support adequate and equitable funding for mental health services and appropriate student to educator ratios for these critical areas. The ideal ratio is 1 school counselor for every 250 students. Very few schools achieve this support level, with ratios averaging 1 counselor to 400 students. Some of our schools in New York don't even have a counselor at all.

School districts continue to use available resources to implement new measures to keep students physically safe and support their mental, social and emotional health. Schools also seek to strengthen other programs, but don't have the resources to do it all.

Special Education Waivers

NYS PTA continues to oppose any proposal or legislation to allow school districts to apply for waivers from certain special education laws and regulations. Federal and state special education requirements were enacted for sound purposes and our children must be adequately served and protected.

Teacher Programs

NYS PTA supports our great teachers, and continues to support a renewed investment in professional learning. We continue to call for significant increases in teacher and educator professional development, and fully support increases to the Master Teacher programs. We also call for increases in Albert Shaker Grants and for the National Board Certification program.

School Safety

One of the most important tasks the education community faces is the safety and security of our students. Mass casualty events over the last few years add an even greater sense of urgency to efforts to ensure schools are safe. According to 2018 data, just 27% of K-12 parents with children indicated strong confidence that their school could deter a school shooting. Thirty-one percent said they were not so, or not at all, confident.

Thirty-four percent of parents feared for their child's physical safety at school—a significant increase from 12% in 2013.

Nearly 90% of superintendents said their districts had done at least one thing to improve school security in the previous six months and 89% indicated they had taken at least one more action following the shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

We fully support creating funding streams to strengthen school safety and improve school climate.

1. Funding should be allocated by formula, rather than as competitive grants, and be flexible, allowing districts to choose security enhancements and/or activities that improve school climate based on individual needs;
2. Explore options to create shared security services through BOCES and provide commensurate support for the Big 5; and
3. Allow building aid to be used to fund space for school-based health and mental health clinics.

We support removing barriers impeding districts' ability to hire experienced security personnel.

1. Raise the salary cap for retired police officers working as school resource officers.
2. Remove the annual waiver requirement for retired police officers when re-entering the workforce as SROs.

We also support expedited processing of all Smart Schools Bond Act applications and elimination of the minimum mileage requirements related to transportation aid in urban areas where student safety is a concern, so pupils are provided with transportation to and from school.

Lastly, we urge the Governor and legislature to review legislative proposals that allow school districts to opt out of being polling places for elections. Further, early voting had made this safety concern more than a one or two-day issue. Mandating elections be held in school buildings, which are typically secured from entry by non-school personnel, is a real security risk for students and educators.

Recovery High Schools

We fully support continued funding for and expansion and access to recovery high school programs.

Substance use disorders continue to be a real and critical concern, and as a community, we must do better to support our children and families in crisis. Children and young adults in recovery are at high risk of relapse, especially as they return to their home/school environments. They go back to the people, places and things that often create triggers that can lead to using substances as a coping mechanism.

Recovery schools need to be in ALL communities, where students can develop sober support systems while working towards meeting educational requirements to earn their high school diploma. Recovery schools are particularly important in communities where there are little to no alternatives for young people. The stress of school and being able to make friends without the peer pressure to engage in risky behaviors, is extremely important for youth who need to develop the skills to navigate the adolescent world. Many of these students also have co-occurring mental health disorders and as such, need to learn how to address the emotional turmoil with cognitive behavioral support. Funds need to be provided not just to school systems, but to OASAS licensed treatment programs to work together to meet the recovering needs of young people.

Excelsior Scholarships

NYS PTA supports expanded access and affordability to higher education for students and families, and supports the allocation to expand the Excelsior Scholarship program. NYS PTA also supports further expansion of this program, and would support universal higher education funding and tuition for all New York students.

SUPPORT FOR THE WHOLE CHILD

Ban the sale of flavored e-cigarettes, flavored e-liquids, and flavored tobacco

We full support Sec. Q in Health and Mental Health (Art VII), and bills S.428 (Hoylman)/A.47A (Rosenthal) and S.6809 (Hoylman)/A.8808 (Bichotte).

These proposals would ban the sale of flavored e-cigarettes, flavored e-liquids, and flavored combustible and smokeless tobacco, including menthol cigarettes. NYS PTA strongly supports these proposals and urges their immediate passage and enactment.

According to New York State Department of Health, nearly 40 percent of 12th grade students and 27 percent of all NYS high school students are now using e-cigarettes, largely driven by flavored e-liquids. NYS high school vaping use today is 160 percent higher than it was in 2014.

Did you know that e-cigarettes are shockingly available in more than 15,000 fruit and candy flavors? E-liquid flavors such as gummy bear, cotton candy, mango, banana smash, bubble gum, and cherry cola are intentionally targeted to children and youth. Further, over half (54 percent) of youth smokers report using menthol products, and that number is even higher among African American youth at nearly 70 percent.

According to a recent report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, there is now clear evidence that e-cigarette use can be "highly addictive" and youth that use these devices are at substantial risk of smoking traditional tobacco products. Even worse, there have been nearly 60 deaths due to lung injury from vaping, according to the CDC.

Our children don't understand the harms of vaping, they don't understand the lifetime of lung disease they face, nor the cancer risks, and they don't understand the risk of death, yes death, due to vaping.

Recreational Cannabis

We strongly oppose the establishment of a recreational cannabis program.

The legalization and commercialization of recreational marijuana creates a serious public and child health threat and sends a mixed message to young people that using recreational marijuana is acceptable.

With the serious crisis of youth vaping, and the continuing opioid epidemic, this harmful legislation is counterintuitive.

NYS PTA urges you to heed the recommendations from leading medical and public health organizations, education groups, and the law enforcement community, and NOT legalize recreational marijuana. Why must we continue to oppose this measure?

- From 2005 to 2015, the number of youth (ages 13-20) who went to urgent care for marijuana related illnesses increased 172%.
- In Colorado after legalization, marijuana impaired driving deaths went up 150%.
- According to the CDC, 80% of lung illness and deaths are THC-related, and 1 in 10 marijuana users will become addicted. For people who begin using younger than 18, that number rises to 1 in 6.
- In Colorado, toxicology reports of adolescent suicide victims show increased marijuana usage, and marijuana has been linked to schizophrenia, depression and anxiety.
- The Children’s Hospital of Colorado outlines the dangers of “Acute Marijuana Intoxication” and discusses the harm of child overdoses, usually as a result of ingestion of edible forms of marijuana (gummy bears, brownies and lollipops).
- Studies show if a child starts using marijuana before 18, the child will lose on average 8 IQ points.

In 2015, the American Academy of Pediatrics reaffirmed its opposition to legalizing recreational marijuana: “We know marijuana can be very harmful to adolescent health and development . . . Making it more available to adults – even if restrictions are in place – will increase the access for teens. Just the campaigns to legalize marijuana can have the effect of persuading adolescents that marijuana is not dangerous, which can have a devastating impact on their lifelong health and development.”

Further, we call for the prohibition on the placement of marijuana dispensaries in proximity to schools, daycare centers, parks, and playgrounds, and prohibit the existing medical dispensaries from automatically becoming recreational dispensaries.

Conclusion

Every parent and family has a dream for their children. It is our job to be dream makers, ensuring every child, no matter their zip code, no matter their ethnicity, no matter their ability, no matter their gender identity, no matter their race, has the highest quality 21st century education to lead them to success in college, career or life.

We humbly ask that you continue to advocate for infusing our schools with the tools and resources necessary to accelerate the success of our children and families. Together, we can make every child’s potential a reality. No other work is more important.