



February 2021

Dear Governor Cuomo,

We are writing to you as a group of high school students from across New York State who belong to the DemocracyReady NY Coalition's Youth Leadership Initiative. [DemocracyReady NY](#) is a statewide, nonpartisan, intergenerational coalition of organizations and individuals committed to preparing all students for civic participation. This year, as the Coalition's youth members, we have turned our efforts to the issue of the underfunding of many New York State school districts.

Our Fund(Ed) New York campaign was launched in January by students from across the state in direct response to your FY22 Executive Budget proposals related to education.

We have learned that public schools in New York have been underfunded for decades despite the constitutional right of students to “the opportunity for a sound basic education,” as determined by the courts in the 2006 lawsuit *Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) v. State of New York*. Through *CFE v. State of New York*, Foundation Aid was created; however, the State consistently fails to fund education at the levels the formula mandates. This results in vast inequities across the state as wealthy districts are better able to make up for a lack of adequate state funding and poor districts struggle to meet their students' needs. “I have been a public school student since kindergarten, and having attended schools with different amounts of funding, I have seen firsthand the disparity in resources and opportunities available for students in each school,” says William Tang of New York City. **We are urging you, Governor Cuomo, to fulfill your promise of Foundation Aid by allocating \$4 billion of state funding to local school districts in the FY22 budget.**

We also understand that districts are facing additional cuts as the state grapples with a \$15 billion budget shortfall resulting from COVID-19. Under your budget proposal, state aid for school districts would decrease by \$1.35 billion and districts would be forced to rely on federal aid to compensate for funding shortfalls. As the state proposes to supplant state funding with federal aid, we would like to point out that schools and students need additional resources, now more than ever. **We reject your Executive Budget proposal to use federal funds to replace state dollars to support our schools because our schools need every dollar they can get to support our recovery from the pandemic.**

As students, we felt the repercussions of underfunding in our schools every day before the pandemic, and now the impacts of isolation, trauma, and learning loss brought on by Covid-19

have made our needs even greater. However, many low-income school districts lack the funding for social workers and other mental health supports to help students heal. We also need additional educational supports such as tutoring and test prep, to help us get back on track after an incredibly disruptive school year. Elizabeth Alzawahra from Albany reports, “My school could not go back to even a hybrid model because they could not afford it. In a school where so many students need to be in school especially in a time like this, it has made a significant impact on the students. Some are depressed and cannot finish their work, or are busy taking care of their family and siblings. Seeing majority white and affluent school districts being able to go to school and not have Albany come back is very disheartening.” **Black, Indigenous, and students of color disproportionately bear the burden of insufficient school support systems, exacerbating inequities that have resulted from systemic racism.**

We also believe schools are civic pillars in each of our communities. The *CFE* ruling stated that students in New York have a constitutional right to “preparation for civic participation.” We know firsthand that when schools are underfunded, the money goes to meeting the bare minimum. Extracurriculars are often cut back, and that includes many of the things that comprise our civic education such as leadership clubs, speech and debate, school newspapers and media clubs, and affinity groups. “We don’t learn anything about local government or being involved in the community while we are at school. I am lucky to be involved in programs outside of school that expose me to these things, but I believe our schools should prepare us better to be contributors to society,” believes Edward Sanchez, from Brooklyn. **As the leaders of tomorrow, it is our right to be educated on policy, government, and how to be active participants in our democracy.**

Because we are all New York State public school students, we are the stakeholders most affected by funding cuts to education. Our group has members from all around the state; we represent public school students from New York City to Upstate to Western NY. And, in all of our schools, we are experiencing the effects of this underfunding firsthand. Schools, when properly supported, build community and empower new generations of leaders. Funding schools is the means to creating a more equitable future. We will be the next generation to sit in the chairs of the Governor and state legislators, whether we are well educated and prepared for civic duty or not. **The students of the DemocracyReady NY Coalition urgently call on you, Governor Cuomo, to equitably fund the future of New York State.**

Sincerely,

Members of New York State Students’ Fund(ED) NY Campaign