

Testimony of

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

By

***Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky, Esq.,
Executive Director***

***NYS Senate Education Committee Hearing on
Foundation Aid and ARP Funds***

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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 our more than 250,000 members of NYS PTA and the parents and families of our 2.6 million New York school children.

NYS PTA appreciates the opportunity to comment on the use of the historic Foundation Aid increase and use of federal American Rescue Plan funds.

Thank you to Senators Mayer and Liu, the Senate Education Committee members, and members of the legislature for your continued commitment to ALL children, their families, and our schools.

A Reflection

The past 18 months have been challenging for our schools, leaders, educators, teachers, school-related professionals, and most importantly for our students.

Schools had to – nearly overnight – transform into a new learning model never attempted before on a large statewide scale. Teachers had to transform instruction and connect with students both synchronously and asynchronously to different and varying degrees of success. Parents and families, many struggling with underemployment, unemployment, food insecurity, illness, lack of technology access or broadband, and their own work schedules had to find ways to help their child learn and figure out – especially for younger children – childcare, as school buildings remained closed. And students, the true educational heroes in the pandemic, had to learn to navigate an entire new world, one filled with uncertainty and worry.

Yet, while the past 18 months have been some of the most challenging NYS schools will ever face, they have been some of the most insightful and rewarding as well.

We watched educators do amazing things for students. We witnessed school counselors support student mental health in unique and incredible ways. We saw families come together, to support each other's children. We saw PTAs across the state run everything from food drives to health insurance signup days. We saw school communities really and truly work together to support every child.

Public school teachers, administrators, and school-related professionals have always gone to extraordinary lengths to provide the very best services and education for our children, but never have they had to do so under such difficult circumstances. Their remarkable commitment and never-ending dedication are to be commended and celebrated, but we will continue to need your help.

We are truly thankful to the Legislature for their commitment to public education, especially in this budget cycle. The historic school aid increase, coupled with an infusion of federal resources are truly helping our schools – and especially after years of fiscal cuts and uncertainty for many districts. The \$1.4 billion investment in Foundation Aid recognizes the critical work of each of our educators and school-related professionals. This historic figure is remarkably just the first step into fully phasing in the Foundation Aid formula.

Further, federal funds from CRRSA, ESSER, and ARP help supplement state funds and support students.

American Rescue Plan, signed into law on March 11, 2021, provides \$1.9 trillion in Federal Stimulus to states. It expanded and extended unemployment benefits, expanded the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, continued the Food Assistance Provisions now in place and made new investments in WIC, and expanded health coverage.

In Education funding, the American Rescue Plan invested \$170.3 billion in funding for education, with \$125.4 billion for state PK–12 public education programs, \$39.6 billion to higher education, and \$7.2 billion in funding for the federal E-Rate program (which will be extended to provide devices and connectivity to students, educators, and patrons of public libraries), and \$3 billion in funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The ARPA Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) for K-12 Schools invested \$125.8 billion for K–12 state education agencies and \$2.75 billion to governors for private schools “to enroll a significant percentage of low-income students and are most impacted by the qualifying emergency.” States must also reserve \$800 million to support efforts to identify homeless children and youth, and provide them with comprehensive, wrap-around services, and SEAs must subgrant not less than 90% of its total ARP ESSER allocation LEAs to help meet a wide range of needs arising from the coronavirus pandemic.

As reminder, LEAs must reserve at least 20% of funds to address learning loss. Remaining funds may be used for a wide range of activities, including:

- Coordinating with public health departments;
- Conducting activities to address the needs of students from low-income families, children with disabilities, English Language Learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth;
- Purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity as well as assistive technology or adaptive equipment);
- Summer learning, and supplemental after-school programs;
- Mental health services;
- Addressing learning loss;
- School facility repairs to reduce risk of virus transmission and support student health; and
- Implementing public health protocols including policies in line with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for school-reopening.

Now, we must move forward. Our schools are thankfully open. Our students are back in seats. Our schools have new infusions of desperately needed resources. And we must remember the positive lessons learned from the pandemic closures.

Collaboration

Schools were required to submit a plan for use of federal funds. In cooperation, many schools during this process solicited feedback from parents and families in various ways: online meetings, surveys, emails, and other electronic connection means.

This was welcomed. During the pandemic, schools were also required, as example, to solicit families on feedback on reopening plans a certain number of times. We need more of this.

We need continued conversations between school leaders, educators, classroom teachers, school-related professionals, and parents and families on how best to continue to spend funds, and how to work together to best support students.

Needed Services

We are renewed by the commitment of these funds to needed and necessary services for students. There must be a focus on the use of these, and future funds, on things like:

- Academic Intervention Services and supports for learning loss;
- Meaningful commitments to mental health support for students, educators and staff;
- Intervention and support strategies for students with disabilities – a unique and critical population with heightened difficulties in serving, especially during pandemic closures;
- Supports for English Language Learners;
- Supports for homeless students and those in foster care;
- Supports for high-need students, and those living in poverty; and
- Technology and device support for students and families, amongst others.

Specifically, on mental health, some sobering statistics:

- Half of all mental health disorders begin by age 14;
- Half of all lifetime anxiety cases begin by age 8;
- More than ¼ of all students experience serious mental health in any given year; and
- Suicidal ideation during pandemic closures increased exponentially.

Further, there are still enormous divergences in student services and programs amongst NYS schools. There must be a focus on the use of these, and future funds, on things like:

- Closing achievement gaps;
- AP/IB/College credit opportunities;
- Enrichment;
- Career and technical education;
- Music and arts education;
- Community school models;
- Recovery High Schools and substance use intervention services;
- Restorative practices;
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives;
- Meaningful family engagement practices;
- School Safety;
- Digital Equity for students including free broadband access; and
- Health and wellness initiatives, amongst others.

While it may be too early in the school year to have a full understanding of the impact of increased Foundation Aid and federal funds, we are fully confident and hopeful that schools will continue to have meaningful stakeholder engagement.

And we understand that sometimes engaging families is extremely difficult. We stand ready to help any school district, school building, school leader, educator, teacher, or school-related professional, in that task.

Through our many NYS PTA support initiatives, we offer free translation services for any NYS school or community group, we offer free help for any family or community member looking for food security, we can assist in enrolling families in WIC/SNAP and other support programs, we can assist in health care enrollment for children and families, and have hosts of other health, wellness, and academic programs available for all NYS children and families.

This is our 125th Anniversary; know that NYS PTA plans on supporting NYS children, families, educators, and schools for at least another 125 years. Together, we can shine a light on every child, with one voice. There is no other more important work.