

I am Patricia Frazier, Past State Treasurer of NYS PTA and proud member of the Western Region PTA, Williamsville PTA, and Buffalo Community PTSA.

I am joined by my colleague Jill Paterson from Western Region and Buffalo Community PTSA, and from Newfane PTA on behalf of our Niagara Region PTA members, my colleague Cynthia Ames.

Western NY is a special place in our state, and we are proud to represent the 9,053 PTA members in 75 PTA units in Western Region PTA, and the 2,083 members in 19 PTA units in Niagara Region PTA.

Jointly NYS PTA is honored to represent our 225,000 members, as the second largest education stakeholder group in NYS, and the parents and families of our 2.6 million public school children. It is our mission to make every child's potential a reality and support EVERY child with ONE voice.

Western Region PTA supports our dedicated PTA volunteers, students, educators and schools in Chautauqua, Cattaraugus, Erie, Genesee, and Wyoming counties.

Niagara Region PTA supports our dedicated PTA volunteers, students, educators and schools in Niagara and Orleans counties

We have provided a map for you of NYS PTA regions in NYS in our written testimony.

Western Region PTA and Niagara Region PTA appreciates the opportunity to reflect on the future of foundation aid, and how changes can impact, and most importantly, benefit and support

children and families statewide. Thank you to the Rockefeller Institute for taking on this critical work and your commitment to ALL children, their families, and our schools.

Our collective PTA regions and the counties we serve have amazing schools, teachers, school related professionals, school leaders and PTA and parent groups who work every day to make every child's potential a reality. Every day, we work cooperatively to see that every child, and their families are supported – in, and out of our school buildings. PTAs play an integral role and continue our mission – to be a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities, and a strong advocate for the education and well-being of every child.

There are 116,984 students in Erie County's 29 K-12 school districts, and 22 charter schools. These students have a graduation rate of 89% and a free and reduced priced lunch rate of 66.94%.

In Chautauqua County, there are 16,862 K-12 students in 18 school districts. These students have a free and reduced priced lunch rate of 75.02%.

In Cattaraugus County, there are 11,517 K-12 students in 13 school districts. These students have a free and reduced priced lunch rate of 68.44%.

In Genesee County, there are 7,205 K-12 students in 8 school districts. These students have a graduation rate of 92% and a free and reduced priced lunch rate of 64.71%.

In Wyoming County, there are 3,593 K-12 students in 5 school districts. These students have a graduation rate of 91% and a free and reduced priced lunch rate of 60.04%.

In Niagara County, there are 25,698 K-12 students in 10 school districts, and 1 charter school. These students have a graduation rate of 87% and a free and reduced priced lunch rate of 64.21%.

In Orleans County, there are 5,090 K-12 students in 5 school districts. These students have a graduation rate of 88% and a free and reduced priced lunch rate of 91.48%.

As you can see, our area of the state serves nearly 200,000 students, the majority qualifying for free and reduced priced lunch. Every student in NY, and in Western NY, needs our support to receive a high-quality, 21st century education that meets global workforce demands, and supports their academic, mental, social, and emotional needs.

When first enacted in 2007, Foundation Aid has the hope and promise of supporting and funding a Sound Basic Education for ALL children. In these past 17 years, our schools have changed, the demands upon our students have changed, the global workforce has changed, and most importantly – the needs of our students have changed.

Our students struggle with food insecurity and poverty, heightened need for mental health support and services, increased need for academic intervention, increasing numbers of migrant students, students with disabilities, homeless students, English Language Learners, a global marketplace, increasing needs for STEM and career and technical education, and more.

But our formula has not kept up with the needs of our students. **We will focus much of our time here on the need to support student mental health.**

According to the NYS Office of Mental Health and NYS Office of Children and Family Services, in their June 2023 report on Youth Mental Health, from 2011 to 2021, the rates of youth who persistently felt sad or hopeless increased from 21% to 29% for teen boys, and from 36% to 57% for teen girls. Those who reported that they seriously considered attempting suicide increased from 16% to 22% over the same period.

Further, the mental health concerns have grown exponentially for LGBTQIA+ youth and youth of color, and according to the Trevor Project, young black people have experienced an increase in suicide attempts, with suicide rates among young black people increasing 37% between 2018 and 2021. Black transgender and nonbinary young people also reported higher rates of all indicators of poor mental health compared to their Black cisgender LGBTQ peers.

But our schools still struggle with the necessary funds to provide meaningful mental health services and school counseling services to our children. A recent NYS Comptroller Audit found that 50% of NYS schools do NOT meet the recommended ratio of one school psychologist for every 500 students. While our school counselor to student ratio IS improving at 333 to 1, we still fall far short of the recommendation of 250 to 1 sadly.

Parents and families are asking for help. In Fall 2023, NYS PTA issued its second Mental Health Survey for parents, families and

educators. More than 2,000 responded (up from 1,000 in 2022), where respondents were asked which youth mental health issues were most important facing our students today. The results showed alarming trends:

- Anxiety – 87.6% of respondents felt anxiety was the most important mental health issue facing our students today
- Social Media – 82.1%
- Depression – 71.2%
- Bullying – 65.7%
- Suicide or Suicidal Thoughts/Ideation – 33.4%
- Cyberbullying – 56.7%
- Substance Use – 34.1%
- Youth Violence – 23.9%

Yet, our school funding formulas ignore mental health, and our state budget piecemeals together inadequate funding for student mental health. We understand this would be incredibly difficult to measure and assign a number to– but isn't everything when we talk about student needs?

So lets talk about the future of public education in NYS and those student needs

We are excited about the Board of Regents vision to transform graduation requirements, following the detailed recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission - a new portrait of a graduate, redefinition of credits, decoupling of specific assessment requirements and expansion of pathways,

and moving to one diploma - NYS is on the verge of an educational transformation.

Our schools, leaders, teachers and students cannot do that work with a 17-year-old formula, that doesn't consider today's student need, and the increased number of programs and services our schools MUST provide our children.

And what does that future hold and what are other priority areas of student need?

- It's time to review student need indexes
- re-establish growth aid
- and considering priority areas like addressing chronic absenteeism
- allocating funding to provide a Free and Appropriate Education to students with disabilities until age 22 or greater
- making prekindergarten funding sustainable
- expanding Career and Technical Education, and as mentioned,
- investing in school-based mental health services.

And the elephant in room in every discussion of foundation aid - Save Harmless

Many of our schools in Western NY are rural, or small, and losing student population, and rely on Save Harmless to continue to support their remaining students, ensuring their success. They cannot do that with less funds. While these districts may be serving fewer students in past years, they are

delivering an expanded range of services and supports to increasing student and family needs.

In this past executive budget, 75% of the save harmless cut and minimum increase would have impacted average or high need school districts.

Today's educational needs, and what's needed to meet the wonderful recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission and Board of Regents requires a new way to calculate adequate, equitable, and necessary support for students.

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 truly thank you for your commitment to our students as we know your work will not be easy. But together, we can make every child's potential a reality. No other work is more important.