



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

Given By

***Lissa Zukoff, NYS PTA Special Education Specialist (Nassau
Region PTA)***

***Joined by members of the NYS PTA Governance Team from Nassau Region and
Suffolk Region:***

***Vice President Joan Wabnik, Suffolk Region Director Wendy Natalone, Nassau
Region Director Shari Beck, Field Support Coordinator Pat Assortato, Wellness
Coordinator Patricia Genco, Family Engagement Coordinator Megan Zarchy,
Juvenile Protection Specialist Namiko Suga, Programs Coordinator Sarah Henris,
Environment Specialist Maria Sanders, Literacy Specialist Tina Shek, and
Resolutions Coordinator Susan Fisher***

Foundation Aid Hearing

July 30, 2024

Farmingdale

I am Lissa Zukoff, Special Education Specialist of the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. (NYS PTA), proud member of the Nassau Region PTA, Sanford Calhoun HS PTSA, Bellmore-Merrick SEPTA, Long Island Pride PTSA and NYS Pride PTSA.

I am joined today by a number of my colleagues from the NYS PTA Governance team from Nassau and Suffolk Counties, including Vice President Joan Wabnik, Suffolk Region Director Wendy Natalone, Nassau Region Director Shari Beck, Field Support Coordinator Pat Assortato, Wellness Coordinator Patricia Genco, Family Engagement Coordinator Megan Zarchy, Juvenile Protection Specialist Namiko Suga, Programs Coordinator Sarah Henris, Environment Specialist Maria Sanders, Literacy Specialist Tina Shek, and Resolutions Coordinator Susan Fisher.

Long Island is a special place in our state, and we are proud to represent the 69,906 PTA members in 317 PTAs in Nassau Region PTA, and the 48,844 members in 305 PTAs in Suffolk 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.

We collectively appreciate 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.

Nassau and Suffolk 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. 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 218,877 students in Suffolk County's 69 K-12 school districts¹ and as of 2022-2023, 3 charter schools. These students have a graduation rate of 91% and a free and reduced priced lunch qualification rate of 49%.²

In Nassau County, there are 195,217 K-12 students in 56 school districts³ and as of 2022-2023, 4 charter schools. These students have a graduation rate of 94% and free and reduced priced lunch qualification rate of 94%.

As you can see, our area of the state serves more than 400,000 students, to great success, with the majority of students qualifying for free and reduced priced lunch. Every student in NY, and in Long Island, 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

¹ <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?county=58>

² All FRPL Data compiled by Hunger Solutions NY, credit to <https://hungersolutionsny.org/>

³ <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?county=28>

demands upon our students have changed, the global workforce has changed, and most importantly – the needs of our students have changed.

Special Education Support

In the 2021-2022 school year, 484,147 NYS students received special education services in our school buildings.⁴

Of our students who receive special education services, approximately 1/3 of them have been identified as having a learning disability, 1/3 of them have been identified as having a speech or language impairment, 12% of them have been diagnosed with autism, and 17% have some other health impairment.

**Number of New York State Children and Youth with Disabilities
Receiving Special Education Programs and Services**

October 5, 2022	Preschool Students		School Age Students							All Students	
	Ages	Ages	Ages	Ages	Ages	Ages	Ages	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
	<1-2	3-5	4-5	6-11	12-13	14-17	18-21				
Federal Disability Categories											
Autism			6,601	28,414	7,811	12,961	3,868	59,655	12.3%		
Emotional Disturbance			187	4,436	3,021	7,649	1,266	16,559	3.4%		
Learning Disability			513	47,996	30,515	63,462	6,698	149,184	30.8%		
Intellectual Disability			163	2,720	1,735	4,142	2,117	10,877	2.2%		
Deafness			55	386	170	304	82	997	0.2%		
Hearing Impairment			150	1,212	450	833	70	2,715	0.6%		
Speech or Language Impairment			19,036	86,822	16,201	19,870	1,628	143,557	29.7%		
Visual Impairment (includes Blindness)			44	512	187	371	46	1,160	0.2%		
Orthopedic Impairment			147	650	195	365	37	1,394	0.3%		
Other Health Impairment			3,510	34,897	15,380	28,935	2,035	84,757	17.5%		
Multiple Disabilities			602	4,473	1,741	3,685	2,100	12,601	2.6%		
Deaf-Blindness			0	6	0	7	5	18	0.0%		
Traumatic Brain Injury			26	216	110	262	59	673	0.1%		
Total School Age										484,147	*
Preschool Disabled (Section 4410)		40,846								40,846	*
Infants and Toddlers	*									*	*
Total - NYS Students with Disabilities	*	40,846	31,034	212,740	77,516	142,846	20,011	484,147		*	*

In the 2007-2008 school year, 17 years ago when Foundation Aid was enacted, 408,856 students were receiving special education services in our NYS schools.

⁴ <https://www.p12.nysed.gov/sedcar/goal2data.htm>

**Number of New York State Children and Youth with Disabilities
Receiving Special Education Programs and Services**

December 3, 2007 ⁽¹⁾	Preschool Students		School Age Students							All Students	
	Ages <1-2	Ages 3-5	Ages 4-5	Ages 6-11	Ages 12-13	Ages 14-17	Ages 18-21	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
Autism			1,784	8,956	2,306	3,514	1,039	17,599	4.3		
Emotional Disturbance			639	10,821	6,391	16,113	2,424	36,388	8.9		
Learning Disabilities			655	51,564	32,874	71,198	11,426	167,717	40.9		
Mental Retardation			323	3,564	2,042	4,939	2,809	13,677	3.3		
Deafness			67	506	209	425	183	1,390	0.3		
Hearing Impairments			144	1,554	555	1,112	174	3,539	0.9		
Speech or Language Impairments			12,270	58,258	9,692	9,359	865	90,444	22.1		
Visual Impairments (Includes Blind)			85	660	253	463	124	1,585	0.4		
Orthopedic Impairments			212	1,403	363	564	80	2,622	0.6		
Other Health Impairments			2,396	22,948	9,204	16,587	1,679	52,814	12.9		
Multiple Disabilities			1,051	7,506	3,000	6,396	2,870	20,823	5.1		
Deaf-Blindness			1	1	2	2	1	7	0.0		
Traumatic Brain Injury			27	347	192	515	170	1,251	0.3		
Total School-Age										409,856	84.9%
Preschool Disabled (Section 4410)		43,385								43,385	9.0%
Infants and Toddlers ⁽²⁾	29,765									29,765	6.2%
Total - NYS Students with Disabilities	29,765	43,385	19,654	168,088	67,083	131,187	23,844	409,856	100%	483,006	100%

Despite New York’s student and population decline between 2007 and 2022, our student with disabilities population has significantly increased. And NYS PTA is proud of the advocacy that we - alongside our educational stakeholders, the Board of Regents, State Education Department, and policymakers – have worked on in these past years to see that students with disabilities have increasing supports, programs and services in our school buildings, homes and communities.

Despite advances in services to students with disabilities, districts still struggle with funding needs, and meeting Least Restrictive Environments (LRE) for students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). We need more support for high-quality inclusive programs and parents and family engagement in the instructional process in order to support inclusive settings. 1:1 support and other classroom aides are being eliminated due to funding concerns, and we must strive for LRE expansion where possible: general education classrooms with support (i.e., tutors or aides); inclusion classrooms (i.e., special education-specific areas of a general education classroom); and special ed classes (i.e., special education-specific classrooms outside of general education). LRE means: students who receive special education services should be in the same classrooms as their peers as much as possible; LRE is not a place - it is a principle that guides the placement decision of a student’s education program; and the LRE for each student may look different because their special education needs are unique.

Importantly, ***we must support a Free and Appropriate Education to students with disabilities until at least age 22.*** A recent ruling of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals requires public schools to provide special education and related services to students with disabilities until age

twenty-two unless they have obtained a high school diploma. Our State Education Department has also weighed in on this ruling, and agreed that our districts should provide these educational services.⁵ Currently, New York State Law provides state funding to students only through the school year in which the student turns twenty-one. State law and school aid funding should be aligned with these new federal requirements.

Lastly, as we discussed in our Buffalo testimony, *our students in 2007 face drastically different mental health needs than our students do in 2024*. The rates of youth who persistently felt sad or hopeless increased from 21 percent to 29 percent for teen boys, and from 36 percent to 57 percent for teen girls from 2011 to 2021, according to the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The availability of services has not kept pace with these mounting needs and schools are increasingly being called on to fill the gap caused by a shortage in community-based mental health providers. Some schools have been able to increase mental health staff and training, however, the scope of the mental health crisis far exceeds the resources schools currently have to address it. Addressing student mental health adequately will require sufficient state funding to expand school-based mental health services.⁶

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.

NOTE: At the end of this testimony, we offer some thoughts from our leaders as they relate to students with disabilities. At any time, these PTA leaders are available for future conversations.

NYS PTA Governance Team reflections on support for students with disabilities:

"I have been a general education teacher in inclusive settings for 15 years (of my 20 in the classroom) and have seen the benefit to LOTS of students with disabilities in general education classrooms.

The best, however, was one young man who has severe reading/writing disabilities in my high school biology class. We had been learning about DNA and genetics, and during a class discussion he raised his hand to ask a question connecting changes in DNA to differences in traits and survival of individuals -- and made the leap from genetics to evolutionary changes in populations over time. He was the only student in the room who was able to 'connect the dots' this early in the course and was able to articulate this incredible connection verbally in a class discussion. (None of the other students demonstrated this level of scientific understanding or the depth of critical thinking that he did.)

⁵ <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/242.pdf>

⁶ <https://nyspta.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ECB-2024-25-School-Finance-Paper-Final.pdf>

His struggles with writing, however, would prevent him from demonstrating this high level of scientific understanding on a written (or Regents) exam. He was able to learn and understand science at a high level, but without accommodations and the support he was given in our classroom, he would not be able to demonstrate that superior level of understanding. Accommodations for students with disabilities are non-negotiables, and alternative methods for demonstrating understanding are critical to assessing students' content knowledge (not just their abilities in reading and writing).”

Amy Hysick
Parent and NYS PTA Education Coordinator
Science Teacher - CNS High School
2017 NYS Teacher of the Year

“When my oldest son was 18-months-old, after discussion with his pediatrician, I scheduled an evaluation with Early Intervention. I didn’t expect it to be a big deal, after all - he was just a baby. The evaluator came in with a suitcase of toys and laid it on the floor. She opened it, took one out, and tried to engage him. He didn’t pay any attention to her, but went to the suitcase, took all of the toys out, got inside, and started licking it. I glanced at her, and watched the pen fly over the forms - ticking box after box. That was when I realized I was in way over my head!

As I am sure you can imagine, many services were recommended, and the path we anticipated following changed dramatically. He attended a center-based preschool, required a 1:1 aide in elementary school, and had a plethora of services during his time in the public school system. I also received parent training and frequent collaborative communication from school personnel. As he got older and transition was upon us, we took advantage of ACCESS-VR and other resources available to us - all with support and information shared by the school. In time, that baby graduated high school with honors, is now attending college & is working a part time job. Are there still plenty of bumps in the road? Yes, of course. But he is only on this path to success because of the incredible support and services he had available to him as he developed.

To be clear - college is not the sign of success for every child. Our children are unique and diverse, with many different strengths and needs. But no child’s future should be decided when they are in kindergarten, and their opportunities cannot be limited due to a lack of funding.

Another one of my children was greatly impacted by Covid. Due to his disability, he was unable to learn virtually, and his mental health suffered as a result. He missed years of school, and it took much trial and error to find an appropriate placement. He won’t graduate when expected, and will need special education and related services past his eighteenth birthday - but he will graduate, which we were not always sure would happen. This has been a difficult and emotional time for all of us, and without the access to services and support provided by our district, and their willingness to work with our private physicians and therapists, I don’t know where he would be.

We have a long way to go when it comes to supporting our students' mental health, and the cost for this can’t be borne solely by the schools. We are still feeling the effects of this pandemic, especially in our most vulnerable learners. The pandemic itself may be over - but the aftershocks are not.

We are your average middle class family. My husband is a NYS Supreme Court Officer and I am a Senior Account Clerk for a public school district on Long Island. Like all New Yorkers, we depend on our school personnel - teachers, counselors, and nurses to help recognize red flags, and to ensure that no learner falls through the cracks. The thought that any youngster in this great state would not have the chance to reach their true potential due to funding, is terrifying. Many families face barriers to educational equity that I don't, in order to best understand the needs of students, school engagement with all caregivers is essential. We must level the playing field, and ensure all families in all school districts have easy access to a free and appropriate public education."

Lissa Zukoff
Parent and NYS PTA Special Education Coordinator

"My name is Maria Sanders, and I am a proud parent and active member of the PTA community. I want to share the story of my son, Evan, and highlight the crucial role that adequate funding plays in supporting students like him.

Evan started his educational journey facing significant challenges. In kindergarten and first grade, he struggled to keep up, and it was suggested that he might need to repeat a grade to mature and catch up. However, after thorough evaluation, he was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia. This diagnosis allowed him to receive an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which provided him with essential support and services.

Evan was placed in an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) class, where he benefited from the expertise of both a general education teacher and a special education teacher. This setting, along with accommodations such as extra time on tests, verbal assessments, a specialized reading program, and assistive technology, enabled him to overcome his academic challenges. Beyond academics, Evan initially struggled socially. However, through participation in various school clubs and activities like the Chess Club, E-gamers Club, Robotics Club, and Model UN, he found his niche and connected with his peers. These extracurricular activities sparked a passion in him, providing a much-needed outlet and fostering personal growth.

Now, as Evan prepares to start his senior year of high school in just five weeks, he proudly holds a 4.0 GPA and is on track to receive an Advanced Regents diploma. His senior year schedule includes challenging courses such as AP History, Calculus, Engineering, Rocket Science, and Welding. Evan plans to attend a New York State University after graduation, where he intends to study Engineering and pursue a Law Degree.

Evan's journey would not have been possible without the necessary funding to provide the support and services he needed. From specialized educational programs to extracurricular activities, these resources have been instrumental in helping him succeed academically and socially. It is a testament to the power of well-funded public education that Evan has been able to thrive.

As the Rockefeller Institute considers potential changes to the Foundation Aid formula, I urge you to ensure that all students, regardless of their individual needs or home address, have access to the resources and support necessary for their success. Public Education is the cornerstone of our children's future, and it cannot happen without adequate funding. Thank you for your consideration."

Maria Sanders
Parent and NYS PTA Environment Specialist

“I am a teaching assistant in a self-contained special education elementary classroom. While I have witnessed the importance of academics, I believe it's how we support the whole child that makes the biggest impact.

During a typical recess, another TA and I watched children playing tag and running through the playground. I remarked how well one particular child, a fourth grader, had come so far in engaging with the other kids. He's autistic and in previous years would walk around by himself and not play with anyone else and now he's laughing and running with the other kids. The other TA turned to me and said, "You don't understand. I had him in kindergarten. He wore braces on both legs and could barely walk. I remember PT was so hard for him but look at him now!"

My student and hundreds of children like him have benefited from extensive services like physical and occupational therapy and speech, but also from regular gym class, push-in foreign language class, art, and music (he's even in the chorus but he thought the instruments were "too loud" and didn't want to participate in band or orchestra). These services and specials are also combined special and general ed classes, which allows all the students to learn about and from each other.

The kids at my school will go on to adulthood never fully realizing what it meant to have all of these programs and honestly, that's the point. I hope that all students across the state will someday view physical education and education in foreign languages and the arts, as well as getting the services that support their different needs, as normal as learning reading and math.”

Namiko Suga
Teaching Assistant, Fork Lane Elementary
Parent and NYS PTA Juvenile Protection Specialist

“My son’s disabilities and mental health disorder were first recognized in Kindergarten, by his teacher, Ms. Gina Mahoney. We hadn’t noticed his continuing tics or anxiety – but as a trained educator – she did right away in the first weeks of school. He had just turned 5, and we started a life long journey to understand how best we could support him. We were fortunate that our small, rural, upstate school invested in our students – in both special education and mental health services. Who ever heard of a rural K-8 school district with only 300 kids having a full mental health staff?

He is now in high school, facing the same tics and anxiety he has faced since he was 5, but I am thankful that our school made that investment – as it was a difficult budget choice for them to do so – so he can be successful in high school and college or career.

It’s exceptionally difficult for a parent to hear the words, your child has a mental health disorder, or your child has a disability. With that, often comes stigma, and a questioning on if we failed somehow as parents. Having a support system truly makes a difference – for both our family, and our son. All children don’t have that luxury.”

Kyle Belokopitsky
Parent & NYS PTA Executive Director