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Testimony  
of  
UJA-Federation of New York

Regarding the  
2014 – 2015  
Elementary and Secondary Education Budget

Presented by

Darcy Hirsh  
Director of Day School Advocacy  
Government & External Relations

Hearing Room B  
Legislative Office Building  
Albany, NY

January 28, 2014

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## **Introduction**

Good afternoon. Chairman DeFrancisco, Chairman Farrell, Chairman Flanagan, Chairwoman Nolan and honorable members, my name is Darcy Hirsh, Director of Day School Advocacy at UJA-Federation of New York. I am here today on behalf of the 130,000 Jewish children currently being educated in the nearly 400 Jewish day schools and yeshivas in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester.

We are deeply thankful for the provisions in the previous year's budget allowing for increased support for our schools, particularly the increases in CAP and Mandated Services Reimbursement, and Safety Equipment for Nonpublic Schools. These funds have made and will continue to make a significant impact on the quality and affordability of Jewish schools in New York State.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today so that I can share our views regarding the education provisions outlined in Governor Andrew Cuomo's 2014-2015 Executive Budget.

## **Education Investment Tax Credit**

Families are increasingly struggling to afford Jewish day school tuition and accordingly, schools are offering increasing sums of scholarship funds – at many schools at least 50 percent of the student population are on some sort of tuition assistance – resulting in a struggle for these schools to meet daily operating costs. At more and more schools, administrators must make a choice between admitting a low-income child and covering costs, such as keeping up to date with technology or providing competitive teacher salaries and benefits.

Recognizing the need for greater private-sector support for all schools, the Education Investment Incentives Act (S.2732 Golden/A.5081 Cusick) would establish a tax credit to encourage private sector investment, both corporate and individual, in public and nonpublic schools. Scholarship tax credit programs create new pools of funding so that the state can save money on public education and more children can receive scholarships to attend the nonpublic schools of their parents' choice.

Specifically, these proposed bills would create an aggregate total of \$250 million in tax credits for any person or company that makes donations to scholarship-making organizations, and to any person or company making donations to organizations benefitting public school staff and students. Fifty percent of the credits must go to donations to public education entities (public school districts, public schools, charter schools, non-profit organizations providing educational services) and 50 percent to educational scholarship organizations (students at both public and nonpublic schools are eligible) and for home-based instruction materials.

By encouraging private donations to public school entities, the Education Investment Incentives Act would ease the burden on the State and local districts to support the public school system, while at the same time increasing scholarship funds for struggling families to send their children to nonpublic schools. We request that this crucial program be established in the final 2014-15 NYS Budget.

## **Mandated Services Reimbursement & Comprehensive Attendance Policy:**

Thank you again for increased funds for the Comprehensive Attendance Policy (CAP) and full funding for Mandated Services Reimbursement (MSR) in the 2013-14 Budget and for agreeing in the 2012-13 Budget to begin to resolve the longstanding debt owed to New York State's nonpublic schools for CAP and MSR. The 2013-2014 State Budget required the Commissioner of Education to produce an analysis of the State Education Department's obligation under the MSR and CAP programs. We have yet to receive this analysis, but anticipate its release and look forward to working together to resolve this unmet obligation of \$224,000,000 - \$194,000,000 for CAP and \$30,000,000 for MSR. These funds are crucial to the successful operation of our community's schools. Participation in CAP allows our schools to ensure all students are safely located throughout the school day and MSR helps schools afford the staff time to comply with state testing and health recording mandates.

As you know, the Governor's 2014-15 Executive Budget proposes a total in MSR and CAP appropriations of \$142,793,000, representing a total increase of \$5,228,000 or 3.8 percent over last year. We are grateful that the Governor has proposed to fully fund MSR and that the CAP allocations have been increasing annually; however, this recommendation falls approximately \$13,796,000 short of the nearly \$59,000,000 that is needed to meet schools' CAP expenses and keep the debt from growing.

The Governor's recommended appropriations are broken down into two parts:

MSR: \$97,589,000 is recommended for MSR, an increase of \$3,573,000 over last year and likely more than what is needed to cover the 2013-14 school year MSR expenses. We anticipate that the additional funds will be used to help pay the over \$30 million accumulated past debt of MSR expenses.

CAP: \$45,204,000 is recommended for CAP reimbursement. While this sum is an increase of \$1,655,000 over last year, it remains approximately \$13,796,000 short of the estimated \$59,000,000 that is required to reimburse schools for their 2012-13 school year expenses. Last year's enacted budget also required 2011-12 school-year CAP expenses to be calculated based on the original reimbursement parameters used to generate the initial claims for reimbursement (2005-06 school year / 2007-08 SFY). The restoration of said parameters therefore took effect in the 2013-2014 State Fiscal Year and would reimburse schools for their full CAP expenses equaling approximately \$59 million. For the purposes of the Department's analysis, it is presumed that the department's CAP obligations for the preceding school years will be calculated based on these "efficiency" parameters.

Governor Cuomo's recommended increase is certainly a step in the right direction, however we urge you to appropriate an additional \$13,796,000 to cover the 2012-13 CAP expenses and keep the State's debt to the schools from growing, in addition to \$25 million as an initial payment for prior year obligations.

## **Safety Equipment for Nonpublic Schools**

Thank you for establishing the \$4.5 million Safety Equipment Funding for Nonpublic Schools program in last year's Budget. We are especially pleased that the State Education Department has recently created a disbursement plan for these much-needed funds. Our community schools acted quickly after the December

2012 Connecticut shooting to reinforce their security systems and are eager to recoup their expenses and further harden their security. No school is immune from dangers that may exist within the community, including independent and religious schools, and the nonpublic school community is thankful that the State has taken steps to protect all children, wherever they may be educated.

Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal includes \$4,500,000 to again fund this necessary program. We urge you to agree to include these funds in the 2014-15 Budget.

### **Universal Pre-Kindergarten**

We support Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal to allocate \$1.5 billion over the next five years for full-day pre-kindergarten programs and request the equitable participation of the nonpublic school community in this crucial program. Nonpublic schools are currently eligible as Community-Based Organizations to provide secular pre-kindergarten to children of all backgrounds. We urge that with the new pre-kindergarten funding school, nonpublic schools continue to be eligible to provide this integral service to the community at-large.

### **Smart Schools Initiative**

UJA-Federation applauds the \$2 billion Smart Schools ballot initiative to enhance technology in New York State's schools. We request the equitable participation of the nonpublic school community in this program so that all of the State's children are prepared to be 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners.

Many Jewish day schools lack the capacity to implement technology programs that would enable students to participate with ease in today's web-based educational and professional world, either due to outdated wiring, insufficient bandwidth, and/or inadequate computers. The NYS Computer hardware loan program has succeeded in resolving this problem to a certain extent; however these limited funds are woefully inadequate to facilitate these schools' transition into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As computer hardware aid is tied to each school district's state aid ratio, the average per capita allocation for computers averages to be just over \$12 per student.

Notwithstanding the increasing reliance on computers for state testing and student assessment, and particularly given the Board of Regents' goal for all schools to soon be capable of administering computer-based examinations, the importance of computer literacy for participation and success in today's society begs for increased technology funding for nonpublic schools. We request that if the ballot initiative passes, nonpublic schools be eligible to participate in this essential technology program.

### **State Aid for Textbook, Computer Hardware and Software, and Library Materials**

We request that you maintain in your budget current funding levels to provide for the equitable loan by school districts of textbooks, educational software, library materials, and computer hardware to all students. We also request that schools be severed from the school district aid ratio in determining computer loan program allocations so that, as discussed above, more funding is available to help nonpublic schools stay up to date with current technologies.

## **Transportation**

District-provided transportation can be the deciding factor for many families considering whether or not to send their children to nonpublic schools. When district transportation is unavailable, the extra transportation costs are passed onto families. Further, since many districts are currently experiencing budget constraints, districts frequently propose cuts to transportation services for nonpublic school students.

To enable as many families as possible the ability to afford schools that conforms with their values, we urge the following: 1) return to the long-standing practice of 90 percent state reimbursement of school district transportation costs to ensure that the current distance of 15 miles is not compromised; 2) increase the maximum distance school districts outside of New York City are required to transport children to school from 15 to 25 miles; 3) ensure that transportation is not denied when public schools are closed or make mid-year calendar changes; and 5) require small city school districts to transport children up to the maximum mileage limit rather than city limits.

## **Full Funding for Academic Intervention Services**

UJA-Federation seeks to obtain a \$20 million allocation to ensure that independent and religious schools can fully comply with the Academic Intervention Service (AIS) regulations promulgated by the NYS Board of Regents, establishing a system of targeted training services for teachers of struggling students. The state currently allocates \$922,000 annually for AIS.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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## **Appendix:**

### **Jewish School Population**

Comprising nearly one third of New York State's nonpublic school student population, the Jewish day schools and yeshivas in UJA-Federation's catchment area contain the largest population of children attending full-time Jewish schools outside of Israel. At over 130,000 students, these schools range widely in level of religious observance and tuition, as do the students range in religiosity and socio-economic status.

According to UJA-Federation's recent study, the *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, this student population is steadily increasing with 19,000 new students entering kindergarten each year. This growth is due to the expanding population of Jewish children ages 0 to 17, from 308,000 in 2002 to 338,000 in 2011, and the propensity for those with large families to also send their children to full-time Jewish school – resulting in 66 percent of all Jewish children attending these schools today, up from 45 percent in 2002. Coupled with our study findings that one in five Jewish households is poor and an additional one in 10 households is near poor, we are finding more and more families unable to afford Jewish education for their children and many more schools struggling to make ends meet. This is why continuation and increases, wherever possible, of constitutionally supported state funding for these schools is so crucial.

### **State Support for Nonpublic Schools is Dually Beneficial**

State support for nonpublic schools benefits both the state and the nonpublic schools. State aid helps to ensure quality and secular academic standards in these schools and is a fraction of the amount the state spends annually on educating each child in a public school. New York State currently spends over \$20 billion annually on education and allocates approximately \$200 million, less than one percent of this figure, to nonpublic schools statewide. These schools are educating over 13 percent of New York State's children. While attending a private school is the personal choice of each particular family, nonpublic schools save the state significant funds. Considering that New York State school districts spend an average of \$18,825 per student according to 2010 figures, nonpublic schools essentially save the state from spending over \$7 billion per year on the approximately 400,000 children enrolled in nonpublic schools. In fact, 15,640 Jewish children in Nassau County alone attend a full-time Jewish school. Considering the impact on the county if all of these children were enrolled in public schools, nonpublic schools provide an essential service to the state at a far reduced rate. We ask that you keep this in mind as you assess funding allocation and distribution of state aid for nonpublic schools.

### **Organizational Background**

UJA-Federation of New York is a Jewish philanthropy that supports a network of more than 100 non-profit agencies in our eight-county catchment area that includes New York City, Long Island, and Westchester. These non-sectarian health and human service providers range in size from small organizations to large institutions. With nearly 60,000 donors and serving 4.5 million people annually, UJA-Federation is uniquely situated to represent and serve the interests of the Jewish community in all of its diversity. UJA-Federation has recognized full-time Jewish education as one of the key foundations for a strong future for Jewish life and, accordingly, has been involved in supporting the local Jewish schools in a variety of ways for 30 years.