



Alliance for Quality Education Testimony to the Joint Senate Finance, Assembly Ways and Means Budget Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education on the Executive Budget

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you.

Year after year, we come back to testify before you with only one goal: to make sure that New York State's students are provided with a great education for a great future. Year after year, we are back to make sure that you all hear their voices to make an adequate investment in public schools.

It was refreshing to hear the governor say in his state of the state address that New York gives every child a quality education-regardless of income, race, or zip code. Unfortunately, that is not the case. NYS is supposed to do that. Yet, it very much matters where you go to school, what is the family's income and of course what is a child's race. Otherwise, why would he refuse to fully fund Foundation Aid, deny the state's 2007 commitment and disregard the fact that two thirds of the remaining Foundation Aid that has yet to be phased in is due to just 25 school districts, all poor, all having 50% or more Black and Latinx students? There is no other explanation for the mere \$338 million of Foundation Aid that he proposed in his \$956 million school aid proposal. This proposal is just than a forth of what the Board of Regents recommended that schools need to ensure that services, programs and staff are maintained and improved. The only way to characterize is grossly inadequate and completely oblivious to the needs of our education system. Our public schoolchildren, are dependent on you once again to ensure that they get adequate resources in the enacted budget. We urge you to follow the Regents' recommendations to fund Foundation Aid at \$1.66 billion for 2019-20 and commit to a three year phase in of the remaining funds.

Instead, the governor insists on promoting a narrative that claims that districts are not funding schools equitably. His proposal, through the so called "equity plan," ignores the fact that the districts he is referring to are dependent on the state for the majority of their funding. **For instance, Buffalo and Rochester are dependent on the state for 90% of their school aid revenue.** Buffalo has only two schools with less than 50% economically disadvantaged students and Rochester's "wealthiest" school has 65% economically disadvantaged students. To say that districts are not distributing their funding equitably without addressing any of the state's responsibility in providing adequate resources is to push "poor students fighting for crumbs" as a superintendent in a very high need district put it. Rather than buying into this narrative, you have a responsibility and the opportunity in your one house budget proposals and in the enacted budget, to set the record straight and affirm the state's responsibility in equitable and adequate funding for our public schoolchildren. As the State Board of Regent's School Aid proposal notes, Foundation Aid is shorted by \$4.1 billion. This Foundation Aid funding is what the state deemed as necessary to provide to schools in order to enable them to make improvements over the course of four years starting in 2007. This commitment is written in law, but year after year, to serve the governor's unwillingness to prioritize public schoolchildren, the formula has been manipulated to serve political interests.

No one can deny the fact that the Foundation Aid formula is the only needs based funding formula in New York State current law. AQE would support updates in the Foundation Aid formula, especially those with updated demographic information and adjusted weighting that accurately reflects student need and drive more funding where is most needed. However, the greatest issue with the Foundation Aid formula is that it has not been adequately funded since 2008. The most devastating effects of Governor Cuomo's denial to fully fund Foundation Aid are felt by school districts with majority Black and Latinx students. As of September 2018, two thirds of the more than \$4 billion in Foundation Aid that the state owes schools is owed to 25 districts, all high needs and all with 50% or more Black and Latinx students. These are roughly the same schools districts that are now being targeted by the governor's overreach and accused that they are not distributing the state aid they receive equitably. While we are in favor of ensuring that school districts distribute the funding they receive equitably, and on programs

and services proven to work, we are opposed to the state's overreach. Oversight and accountability could just as easily ensure that the students and schools that need the most resources receive them, without undoing the core New York principle of local control.

At the same time the governor claims that there isn't money available for public schools, his budget provides a 3.5% increase to charter schools and an additional \$37 million as direct aid to charters in New York City. It seems that the governor only believes that funding is not available to public schools students, not to privately run charters.

There are a few positive steps in the right direction in the executive budget and those are worth noting: the continued investment in full day pre-K and community schools. The executive budget includes \$15 million in pre-K funding for three and four year olds, which is not only positive but necessary to continue to expand access to quality full day pre-K to our youngest New Yorkers. Unfortunately, \$15 million is not an adequate amount to provide access to enough children. At this rate of expansion, it will take at least 57 years to reach all the four year olds in the state. Currently, 80,000 four-year-olds do not have access to a full day pre-K program across the state, even though the governor promised that he would fund any district that was ready to have pre-K years ago. Many parents and districts are asking themselves and the governor now: "where is my pre-K?" We urge you to add \$150 million, \$125 million for expansion and \$25 million devoted to ensuring on going quality in our programs statewide.

AQE also supports the expansion of community schools. The \$50 million proposed this year are half of what is necessary to maintain momentum in creating more community schools. We strongly support a categorical aid for community schools, separate from Foundation Aid. Community schools funding has transformed schools. For instance, in Buffalo, there are now 21 community schools. They were all receivership schools. Now, three or four years into transforming them into community schools, only three of them continue to be on the receivership list. The state should maintain and increase its investment in this strategy, as well as, provide more support for the Technical Assistance Centers that help school districts with implementing the strategy.

Another positive step in the right direction in the executive budget language was the definition of the responsibilities of the School Resource Officers in the Memorandum of Understanding with school districts. The executive budget is clear and explicit regarding discipline issues that should be left to school administrators and specialists to address. This is a positive step to ensuring that we stop over criminalizing our students, and in particular, our students of color who are much more likely to face suspensions, detention or arrest. In the same vein, we support the \$3 million investment in creating a positive school climate by training teachers and school leaders in using alternatives to suspensions. We believe that \$50 million is necessary to implement alternatives to suspensions, and to train teachers and other school personnel.

Our education system requires a real investment in order to improve services and programs for our students, to increase supports for them and their families. This begs the question: “how are paying for all this,” especially with the growing deficit and shortfall of revenues. The answer is clear and one that most New Yorkers support. Tax millionaires. Currently, millionaires are not paying their fair share. Ultimately, budgets are about priorities. We are either going to decide to prioritize the needs of our public school students or we are going to be balancing the budget on their backs again. Put our children first, fully fund Foundation Aid over three years, and show them this legislature has their best interest in mind.