



Testimony of Carmen Collado,  
Chief Relationship Officer

The Shield Institute  
At the New York State Legislature  
Joint Budget Hearing on the  
Governor's Executive Education Budget  
February 11, 2020

*Senate Finance Committee Chair Liz Krueger*  
*Assembly Ways and Means Committee Chair Helene E. Weinstein*

Good afternoon, my name is Carmen Collado. I am Chief Relationship Officer at The Shield Institute, a human services agency that has been serving New Yorkers for 99 years. We work with families and communities to help enable children and adults with intellectual/developmental disabilities to lead full, meaningful lives.

I want to thank Senate Finance Committee Chair Liz Krueger and Assembly Ways and Means Committee Chair Helene E. Weinstein for chairing this meeting, the members for their work on this committee, and all who have worked to support children with intellectual/developmental disabilities, and their families. The Shield Institute, along with our colleagues in the Special Education Sector, deeply appreciate the leadership and support that the Senate and Assembly have provided on behalf of vulnerable New Yorkers. As a member of the Interagency Council (IAC), we are here today to stand with the 250 not-for-profit providers and are unified in our efforts to maintain and improve services for the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers that we collectively serve. Today, I want to address a dire crisis that our 4410 and 853 Schools are facing, as they struggle to meet the growing demand for Special Education services.

The Shield Institute, accredited by the Council on Quality and Leadership (CQL), is committed to providing quality education and support services to our communities. However, we have had difficulty recruiting and maintaining teaching staff with such an extreme pay disparity for certified Special Education Teachers. Without the necessary funding for our Preschool and School-Age programs, our ability to hire and retain teachers and teacher's assistants is an endless struggle, limiting the number of children and teens that we can provide services to.

Since 2012, while state aid to public school districts increased by 46%, 853 programs have only received a 26% increase state-wide. Worst still, preschool special education providers have only received a 10% increase in tuition. Between 2009-2013, 4410 and 853 programs were heavily impacted by no cost of living adjustments. Combined, these factors have contributed to the closing of 61 preschool special education programs, 31 of them located within New York City. Subsequently, the children with the greatest need of services were impacted most, due to a lack of available service providers.

The Shield Institute serves children and families in the most impoverished neighborhoods in New York. Many of these families are recent immigrants, live in single-parent homes, and some of our population lives in transitional housing. The needs of our communities to access quality services is critical, and yet teacher shortages combined with the salary differential is eroding our ability to maintain qualified faculty and our ability to meet the needs of those who need it most!

Recent pay increases for public school teachers, exponentially added to challenge of 4410 and 853 programs to manage the salary differential. Salary data received from New York State Education Department reflects a \$20,000 – \$40,000 pay gap between public school teachers and not-for-profit Special Education Teachers, most of whom work an additional two months of the year. To address the growing teacher vacancy rates in our 4410 and 853 programs, we are calling on New York State Legislature to re-evaluate the current funding methodology, and ensure that Special Education programs receive the same pay raises as all other Special Education staff regardless of where they serve students.

As a consequence, the inadequate funding of Special Education Preschool and School Age programs, 4410 and 853 Schools are increasingly reliant on teachers/teachers' assistants with little to no experience. Our programs operate with a sense of insecurity fearing that on any given day they may lose employees. Faced with a higher teacher/teacher assistant vacancy rates, there may be no viable options to fill those positions. Classrooms are utilizing program administrators and supervising teachers who have teaching certifications but should be performing administrative roles at schools, resulting in a lack of experienced educators to supervise and mentor new teachers.

Our priority is the vulnerable population we serve, and we cannot afford to put them at risk while they wait for school placement. Without the necessary tuition increases for 4410 and 853 schools, programs will absolutely face downsizing of experienced staff or outright closures, and vulnerable children and teens may not receive the help they need. We ask on behalf of parents of children in need of Special Education, who pay the same taxes as parents of children in public schools, that Special Education programs receive the same resources. With a reported rise in autism diagnosis over the last decade, it is critical that the New York State Budget address the fiscal neglect of 853 and 4410 schools to ensure that Special Education teachers/teacher assistants are paid appropriately for equal work and in doing so, ensure that every child with i/dd will be granted an appropriate education.

To ensure that non-public Special Education programs receive the same pay raises as all other public school teaching staff in New York City, we believe that the Division of Budget should implement a similar rate adjustment system as it did with the recent minimum wage increases, which were heavily supported by our Governor. By using the recent pay increases for public school teachers, and applying that data as a basis to increase providers direct care costs in its tuition rates in 4410 and 853 programs will allow the salary differential for Special Education teachers and teacher assistants to be fairly compared to the regional median compensation for comparable job titles of public school districts, which is determined and published annually by the Department's Basic Educational Data Systems (BEDS).

Thank you for your time this afternoon,  
Carmen Collado