

Testimony of UJA-Federation of New York

**The Joint Fiscal Committees of the New York State Legislature
Elementary and Secondary Education Hearing for Fiscal Year 2021-2022**

**Submitted by:
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January 28th, 2021

On behalf of UJA-Federation of New York, our network of nonprofit partners and those we serve, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the importance of maintaining and expanding support for education in New York State.

Established over 100 years ago, UJA-Federation of New York is one of the nation's largest local philanthropies. Central to UJA's mission is to care for those in need-identifying and meeting the needs of New Yorkers of all backgrounds and Jews everywhere. UJA connects people to their communities, responds to crises in New York, Israel and around the world, and supports nearly 100 nonprofit organizations serving those that are most vulnerable and in need of programs and services.

Pre-Kindergarten

UJA's non-profit partners provide Pre-K programs to young children in neighborhoods across New York City, Westchester and Long Island. All of UJA's non-profit partners, who offer Pre-K services, provide a wide range of programs and resources in their communities. These programs offer extended hours and year-round care for children, which parents and/or guardians have relied on to continue to work to provide for their families during the pandemic. Providers are extremely knowledgeable of the specific needs of the communities they serve, and offer instruction in languages other than English when needed. UJA's non-profit partners in New York City are able to provide this service partially due to funding that the state contributes to support the Universal Pre-K for All initiative. UJA appreciates the inclusion of the \$370 million in the FY22 Executive Budget that supports the Universal Pre-K program in New York City.

Unfortunately, the FY 22 Executive budget did not include any funding to expand Pre-K in districts outside New York City where three and four-year olds do not have access to free, state funded programs. A significant investment is needed to achieve truly universal state funded Pre-K across the state. As of early 2021, 77,000 four-year olds still had no access to free full-day Pre-K in New York State. UJA recommends including \$770 million in the budget which will be used to expand access to free Pre-K for all children in the state.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed barriers to education resulting in learning loss for children. In many cases, families who could afford additional assistance or tutoring for their children could address these barriers, while others, who could not, struggled to provide the supports their children needed to benefit from virtual, sporadic in-person learning or any educational opportunities in the case of fee for service Pre-K programs. Access to free, high-quality Pre-K is one of the most effective educational strategies for addressing this inequality, it is also one of the best ways to ensure that parents and guardians can be part of the workforce-one of the main components of moving New York State forward on the path to economic recovery.

UJA also supports the inclusion of \$5 million to establish three Regional Technical Assistance Centers that will assist districts expanding early childhood education options, including Pre-K. These Centers will be located outside New York City and help districts to meet the highest quality standards while supporting partnerships between school districts and community based programs. This investment would provide the supports districts need to successfully implement the expansion of Pre-K.

Preschool Special Education Programs

In recent years, the underfunding of 4410 preschools (special education preschools for children with disabilities) in community based organizations has resulted in teachers at these schools being paid significantly less than what they would be compensated working in similar school district programs. In some cases, school districts can pay teachers on average \$20,000 to \$40,000 more than what teachers receive at 4410 preschools.

Lack of adequate funding has negatively impacted 4410 preschools ability to maintain competitive salaries for their staff ultimately making it impossible to recruit and retain qualified teachers for their programs. This underfunding has caused more than 60 programs in community based organizations to close in recent years with more at risk in 2021. The pandemic has only exacerbated the financial challenges facing 4410 preschools (for example programs are responsible to fund their own PPE needs) making it difficult for many of these program to remain solvent.

Due to the closure of multiple programs, many children with disabilities do not have access to services at a special education preschools, despite being entitled to this specialized education. To ensure that special education programs remain open their reimbursement rates must be increased. UJA supports an increase in the reimbursement rate for preschool special education 4410 programs by at least 10% to provide the resources programs need to continue to serve this vulnerable population of children. In each of the five years before the pandemic, New York State only approved a 2% increase in the reimbursement rates for preschool special education programs--additional investment is desperately needed.

Nonpublic School Funding

In this year of unprecedented challenges for all schools resulting from the impact of the pandemic, nonpublic schools have spent millions of dollars complying with state-imposed health protocols to maintain teaching and learning, whether remote or in-person. Costs, so far, have ranged between tens of thousands of dollars to upwards of millions of dollars (depending on school size) for expenses included but not limited to the hiring of additional COVID-related

staff, necessary technology upgrades, ongoing school sanitizing, physical protective barriers and signage, personal protective equipment, air filtration system upgrades and the ongoing testing of students and faculty for COVID infections as well as data collection and reporting. It is critical that nonpublic schools be reimbursed for these expenses and provided additional current-year funding to cover ongoing COVID-related costs. As NYS continues to make great strides in containing the spread of COVID-19, we urge the legislature to ensure that the health and safety of the nonpublic school community is not left behind and that all schools are reimbursed for the cost of COVID-related expenses.

Although schools were forced to shift their focus to responding to the COVID pandemic, everyday instructional programs continued. UJA appreciates the proposed funding included in the FY 22 Executive Budget and the Governor's recognition of the role over 1,600 nonpublic schools play in educating approximately 400,000 children in New York State. Specifically, UJA is grateful that \$193 million will remain available for 2020-21 for Mandated Service Reimbursement (MSR) and the Comprehensive Attendance Policy (CAP). UJA is also encouraged to see that MSR and CAP were included in this year's budget. However, UJA is concerned that the program in the FY 22 Executive Budget was reduced to \$189 million. This program is vital for nonpublic schools across the state, and as these schools face unprecedented challenges and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, reductions in crucial state funding places extreme hardships on an already fragile nonpublic school system. UJA requests funding for the MSR and CAP programs to be restored to at least \$193 million so that nonpublic schools are equipped to meet the financial challenges due to the pandemic.

Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the mid-March shutdown of all schools in the state, it became clear that school districts would not be able to fulfill their required 180 days of instruction and that, as a result, their state aid would be automatically reduced. The Governor and lawmakers, appropriately, moved quickly to ensure that aid to public schools would be "held harmless" so as not to penalize districts financially for circumstances beyond their control. A comparable situation exists for most nonpublic schools wherein their 2019-20 school year aid due in early 2021 and their 2020-21 school year aid due in early 2022, will be automatically reduced because nonpublic schools were forced to close and/or operate remotely and the State has been forced to cancel the administration of state exams. Consistent with how the automatic cut to public school aid was averted (as if districts were in session for 180 days), UJA requests that the legislature ensures the automatic cuts to Mandated Services Aid for 2019-20 and 2020-21 be averted by allowing CAP to be claimed as if nonpublic schools were in session for a full year. Additionally, we ask that you ensure the automatic cuts to Mandated Services Aid be averted by allowing MSA to be claimed as if the state tests were administered.

While we are encouraged by the Governor's inclusion of the STEM reimbursement program in the proposed budget, UJA is concerned that the Executive Budget includes a reduction in the program to \$29.4 million. Continuing to fund this program is recognition by the state of the growing need for qualified STEM education teachers in nonpublic schools by providing grants to reimburse schools for costs of STEM education teacher's salaries. Reduced funding in this moment of financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic creates a significant burden on nonpublic schools. We ask that funding for the STEM reimbursement program increase this year. The importance of the STEM reimbursement program is evidenced by how many nonpublic

schools have applied. By August 1, 2018, the state had received 1,800 applications totaling \$81 million. Although we recognize that the state cannot fulfill the \$81 million demand in applications this year, it is vital that the state continues the STEM reimbursement program commitment in the FY 21 adopted budget, especially during a time when our nonpublic schoolteachers are facing unprecedented demands.

With families concerned about security, UJA appreciates the Governor's continued allocation of \$15 million for the Nonpublic School Safety Equipment (NPSE) Grant and \$25 million for security for vulnerable institutions. We remain grateful for these programs and in light of the recent antisemitic cyberattack on North Shore Hebrew Academy, we are seeking an increase in funding and adding cyber security measures as allowable expenses in these programs to combat this new threat.

Adult Literacy Education (ALE)

ALE funds English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Adult Basic Education (ABE) and High School Equivalency (HSE) preparation classes and is one of the few state funding streams able to address the needs of lower-level learners. In New York State, there are over 3.5 million individuals who lack their high school diploma, English language proficiency, or both. There are 15,000 New York City residents on a waitlist for adult literacy classes.

However, the Governor's Executive Budget Proposal cuts the addition \$1.5 million added by the Legislature in the FY2019-20 Enacted Budget, funding ALE at \$6.3 million. UJA respectfully requests support for the restoration of \$1.5 million and the investment of an additional \$17.2 million in ALE programs. This additional investment would raise ALE funding to \$25 million and would allow the State to serve an additional 10,000 learners.

Limited skills make it difficult for individuals to support their children in school, access health care, secure and maintain living-wage jobs, advocate for their rights as workers, and fully participate in the political process. Many of these adults are currently on the frontlines of the pandemic, performing essential work that is sustaining our communities. Some are the grocery store workers, delivery workers, and home care workers risking their lives to maintain their livelihoods and to care for us all. Others are the restaurant workers, salon workers, and domestic workers who have lost their jobs and incomes and face a harsh reality with little or no safety net. Adult literacy education – and the additional support services that adult literacy programs provide – will play a vital role in helping to stabilize the lives of many of our most essential New Yorkers.

Over the past year, adult literacy programs have quickly and effectively pivoted to remote learning and support for their students, adapting class activities, providing information on the rapidly changing health crisis, and transforming programming to ensure that adult learners do not get left behind. Using online platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom, students are continuing to build their reading, writing, and math skills, preparing for their high school equivalency exams, and increasing their English conversational skills. Parents are being supported by their programs to take on a greater role in the education of their school-aged children, a role that has become critical during these times. The educational gains made over this

time could prepare these adults to help restart the economy and ensure greater security for themselves and their families, rather than leaving them even more vulnerable and marginalized.

Conclusion

UJA-Federation of New York respectfully urges your consideration and support of these vital programs that assist our state's most vulnerable and neediest individuals and the organizations that serve them. Thank you for your consideration. Please contact Faith Behum behumf@ujafedny.org or 212-836-1338 with any questions.