



**Submitted Testimony of Lena Bilik, Policy Analyst at Children's Aid
Legislative Public Hearing on 2021-2022 Executive Budget Proposal:
Elementary Education
January 28, 2021**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the 2021-22 Executive Budget Proposal as it pertains to Elementary Education. For nearly 168 years, Children's Aid has been committed to ensuring that there are no boundaries to the aspirations of young people, and no limits to their potential. We are leading a comprehensive counterattack on the obstacles that threaten kids' achievements in school and in life. We have also constructed a continuum of services, positioned every step of the way throughout childhood that builds well-being and prepares young people to succeed at every level of education and every milestone of life. Today over 2,000 full and part time staff members empower nearly 50,000 children, youth and their families through our network of 40 locations including early childhood education centers, public schools, community centers and community health clinics in four New York City neighborhoods – Harlem, Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and the north shore of Staten Island.

As a multi-service agency, we employ a holistic strategy that serves children and their families at every stage of development—from cradle through college and career—and in every key setting—home, school, and community. This cross-sector approach is more vital than ever, as the COVID-19 pandemic destabilizes the communities that we serve and exacerbates existing racial and socioeconomic inequity. In this critical period, young people and their families need a trusted partner like Children's Aid to provide a network of resources that they can turn to when experiencing the relentless challenges that have permeated this crisis—from food insecurity to remote learning challenges to the grief that comes with losing a loved one. Our staff has the expertise and tools to help clients overcome these struggles, keeping them on track to realizing their promise.

As an agency with a strong state advocacy agenda, we are members of and support the platforms of the New York State Community Schools Network, the New York State Network for Youth Success, the New York School-Based Health Alliance, the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, Winning Beginning NY, and the Fostering Youth Success Alliance. Together, we are on a mission to connect children with what they need to learn, grow, and lead successful, independent lives.

Transforming Education through Community Schools

For over 25 years, Children's Aid has operated community schools in partnership with the New York City Department of Education. We believe that the community schools strategy successfully removes the barriers to learning that get in the way of youth success – both academically and socially. We integrate expanded learning programs, comprehensive health services, and family engagement strategies into each school building so that school staff can focus on teaching and children can focus on learning. Through our National Center for Community Schools, we provide ongoing technical assistance and training nationally and locally to schools, school districts, and intermediaries interested in implementing the community school strategy. Currently, Children's Aid partners with 21 community schools in New York City. Children's Aid community schools provide programs and services across four domains: academic, social-emotional, health and wellness, and family and home. These programs and services include afterschool programming, targeted academic interventions, attendance support, school-based health clinics with medical, dental, and vision services, mental health services and counseling, parent



workshops, family events, and many other services. Key to the success of community schools is having a lead partner who coordinates the services at the school level; advocates for the school's needs; brings in additional resources, programs, and services; conducts needs assessments and supports with data-driven decision making; and has a full-time presence in the school. Children's Aid provides every one of our schools with a full-time Community School Director to coordinate with school leadership and ensure resources, programming, and services are integrated, both during the school day and during extended learning time.

During the pandemic, Children's Aid community schools have continued to be lifelines to our students and communities. When schools were closed, our staff conducted 1:1 calls, emails, and zooms to check in with families on how remote learning/access were going, whether food was available, and general inquiry about needs and/or provision of community resources. Our community schools were also able to collaborate with our Go Healthy program and other support services to provide grab and go meals, food boxes and bags, and face masks to families. Because of the connection we have as a founding member of the Boys and Girls Club of America, we have been able to leverage additional food to serve thousands of meals as well as PPE for staff, youth, and families. In addition, we have tried to pick up the slack to support the New York City Department of Education by providing devices and technical assistance with devices to children who needed them. Our staff has also been providing remote mental health, counseling, teletherapy, and social emotional support sessions for both students and parents. Our mental health support has been crucial; many of our students and families are facing real loss, fear, anxiety about the future, and depression. Along with our usual mental health and social-emotional learning supports, we have also started offering SEL sessions in both Spanish and English for parents, to help them learn to recognize and respond to stress, anxiety, and grief in themselves and their children, and increase social emotional stability for their families. The way our staff jumped into action was the way community schools all across the state did, as well. Community schools are designed to adapt to the challenges and barriers facing families that have been worsened by the pandemic.

Recognition of the promise of community schools:

- A groundbreaking RAND report published in 2020 shows that the community school model is working in New York City. A comparison of 113 of the city's community schools with 399 other city schools with similar demographics and levels of student achievement showed that community schools have had markedly positive impacts on students and communities. New York City's community schools (NYC-CS) were found to have a positive impact on student attendance in all school levels, and across all three years of the study. The study also found that NYC-CS led to a reduction in disciplinary incidents for elementary and middle school students, and had a positive impact on math achievement and credit accumulation. There was also evidence that NYC-CS supported improvement in school climate for elementary and middle schools.¹
- Children's Aid community schools' most recent data also reflect similarly positive outcomes in student success. 62% of participants in our targeted chronic absence intervention in K-8 community schools improved their attendance in 2018-19. The same year, 100% of our K-8 community schools exceeded the city percent of math proficiency, and 82% exceeded proficiency of their peer schools. In our high schools, 99% of our youth were accepted to College

¹ Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative, the RAND Corporation, 2020.



(of those that applied) last year. And 87% of our cohort of high school graduates enrolled in college in Fall of 2019 persisted to the next semester.

- New York State’s Reimagine Education Advisory Council recommended community schools as an innovative model school districts should utilize and include in their school reopening efforts.
- Multiple national education think tanks and organizations, from the Brookings Institute² to the Learning Policy Institute³ to the Hechinger Report⁴, have called for the community schools approach to be expanded when considering roadmaps for transforming education after the pandemic.
- New York City Mayor de Blasio announced in December 2020 efforts to expand the Community Schools Initiative to help NYC students and schools in neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19 deal with the emotional toll from the pandemic.

Budget Requests

As members of the steering committee for the New York State Community Schools Network, we are carrying the Network’s budget requests. We are pleased to see that the Executive Budget maintains \$250 million in Community Schools Aid included in last year’s budget. We understand the gravity of the budget deficit this year, and are thankful for the acknowledgement that community schools are critical supports for children and families, now more than ever. We advocate that the State maintains that \$250 million in existing community schools set-aside funding. We also recommend the state expand funding over the next five years by planning, in upcoming years with better budget outlooks, to eventually invest an additional \$100 million in a new Community Schools Categorical Aid to adequately fund and sustain community schools statewide. These new funds will allow school districts to develop quality community schools, to strengthen and enhance their work, and to sustain successful community schools. This kind of investment will continue to be crucial in the coming years to help young people recover from the lasting impacts of the current pandemic and economic crisis.

We also recommend that the State increases the \$1.2 million investment in Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) by \$650,000 for a total appropriation of \$1.85 million annually through 2023. School districts and community partners must receive the necessary support and implementation assistance to ensure their efforts are successful and meet the immense and ever-changing needs of young people and families. An additional \$650,000 would provide funding for each of the three TACs to hire a dedicated staff member and enhance existing capacity for on-site technical assistance and coaching when it is safe to do so. This will also allow for an annual “statewide” convening for community school directors or district representatives. Providing principals, superintendents, and district administrators with vital on-site technical assistance and capacity building support will be more effective and efficient in ensuring schools and school districts are successful in their community school efforts. Further, an annual statewide convening will provide networking opportunities and valuable resource sharing. Finally, increased funding will allow for the creation of an 8.5% set-aside for Department administration to increase staff capacity and support.

² Kristen Harper, Sarah Jonas, and Rebecca Winthrop: “Education inequality, community schools, and system transformation: Launching the Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools.” <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/11/10/education-inequality-community-schools-and-system-transformation-launching-the-task-force-on-next-generation-community-schools/> (2020)

³ LPI: “Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond.” <https://restart-reinvent.learningpolicyinstitute.org/> (2020)

⁴ Jane Quinn: “Opinion: To the rescue — The schools we need now are community schools.” <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-to-the-rescue-the-schools-we-need-now-are-community-schools/> (2020).



Additional Recommendations

In our community schools work, we have found that several targeted services and strategies are important factors to alleviate the barriers to learning for children. We know that regular attendance at a high-quality afterschool program over several years can close the achievement gap in math for low-income students.⁵ Currently, across all our community schools and centers, Children's Aid serves over 3,000 young people in afterschool and expanded learning programs. These programs are crucial parts of a comprehensive set of services to help schools adequately address the needs of high-poverty communities. Our afterschool programs offer a balance of academic support, opportunities in leadership, fitness, the arts, and life skills development, all embedded within social-emotional supports reinforced by our staff. Researchers have identified these types of activities as key for enabling youth to build the critical thinking and social skills that prepare them for success in college and career in the 21st century.⁶ Early childhood education is also a crucial investment. Children's Aid provides early childhood education programs for 850 infants, toddlers and preschoolers across a total of 10 sites. Five of our sites are co-located in NYCDOE public schools.

As statewide members of the New York State Network for Youth Success and the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, we support their budget asks to help solidify and strengthen the various programs and systems that break down socio-economic and racial barriers and help young people reach their full potential.

- Afterschool, Summer, and Expanded Learning Programs. Baseline funding for Advantage After School (\$33 million), Empire State After-School Programs (\$55 million), Extended School Day and School Violence Prevention (\$24.3 million), and the Youth Development Program (\$15.6 million) in 2021. Help afterschool programs respond adequately to New York's family needs by directing \$250,000 to the NYS Network for Youth Success to sustain the mobilization and coordination of high-quality expanded learning programs, and include budget language that provides flexibility for programs to adapt in times of an emergency. Dedicate a percentage of new revenue streams to increase access to affordable high-quality afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs.
- Early Childhood Education. Invest \$500 million to stabilize and secure equitable access to quality childcare:
 - Provide counties with \$370 million to make the child care subsidy system more equitable by eliminating unfair eligibility variations across counties and communities, and prioritizing families with the greatest need
 - Commit to eliminating expulsions and suspensions in child care and pre-K
 - Invest \$100M to create a fund to increase workforce compensation to a fair wage and improve child care quality.

Additionally, we wish to provide comment on school-aid in this budget. Given the state's financial circumstances, we recognize that the state proposal for education aid could have been far worse for

⁵ Deborah Lowe Vandell, *The Achievement Gap is Real*, <http://www.expandinglearning.org/docs/The%20Achievement%20Gap%20is%20Real.pdf> (2013).

⁶ Robert Halpern et al., *Realizing the Potential of Learning in Middle Adolescence*, <http://www.erikson.edu/wp-content/uploads/Realizing-the-Potential-of-Learning-in-Middle-Adolescence.pdf> (2013).



school districts, including the New York City Department of Education. The utilization of the federal education funding provided as a part of the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) could meet a vital need in the short term. However, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge concerns about the longer-term consequences of overreliance on federal funding to fill state budget deficits and the utilization of one-time funds to support reoccurring operational costs.

The utilization of the entirety of the state's \$4 billion in CRRSA funding to support school aid maintenance and increases in a single school year sets up a funding cliff in both the school and state fiscal year 2022-23. If the Executive proposal is adopted, the state would start the process of developing the next year's budget with a \$1.7 billion hole in state aid. The Executive budget proposal assumes that the state will have at least \$6 billion in yet-to-be provided unrestricted federal aid. If those funds fail to materialize, it is reasonable to assume that state support in all program areas, including education, would be further eroded.

Though NYC district schools would see an increase in funds year over year under the Executive proposal, that net increase masks some of the true impacts. Of greatest concern is the proposal to consolidate 11 expense-based aid streams into a single services aid, and then dramatically reduce the funding associated with the new aid stream. If the current law formulas were allowed to run, NYC would generate a moderate year-to-year increase of 3.2%. Instead, the Executive proposal consolidates and reduces the funding for NYC under the new stream by 67% against last year's allocation. This new formula has no mechanism for escalating payments in future years, and is built on a base year, 2019-20, in which some reimbursable costs may have been artificially low due to the pandemic and extended school closures. It will be critical to balance the current year needs to provide support and address real time costs associated with reopening and managing the pandemic against longer term fiscal planning.

Closing Remarks

Children's Aid sincerely thanks the New York State Legislature for their support of New York youth and their families. Ensuring that New York's students have the best opportunities available to them so that they are able to realize their full potential is not only the right thing to do, but imperative for the future of New York State. We believe that in order to do that, we must invest in schools as hubs of services, programs, and opportunities that can give youth that chance to thrive.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on these critical issues in the lives of children and families in New York State. Please feel free to contact Lena Bilik at lbilik@childrensaidnyc.org with any questions regarding this testimony.