

Testimony of

***New York State Congress of Parents & Teachers
(NYS Parent Teacher Association)***

By

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Please see here for a recorded version of this testimony:

<https://youtu.be/oEkR3h030vA>

I am Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky, the Executive Director of the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. (NYS PTA), and am proud to represent nearly 250,000 members of NYS PTA and the parents of 2.6 million New York school children. I am honored to be joined by our State President Dana Platin.

NYS PTA appreciates the opportunity to comment on how the Executive Budget impacts children and families statewide.

Thank you to Assembly and Senate Finance Chairs, Education Chairs and members of the legislature for your continued commitment to ALL children, their families, and our schools.

Hello, I'm Dana Platin, President of NYS PTA. I am a proud school related professional, working with the very best Kindergarten students, in the Sachem School District in Suffolk County. Most importantly, I am the proud mother of three wonderful children, raised in our great public schools where they each received an outstanding education.

My youngest son, Tyler, who taught me more about parenting and education than I could ever imagine, has autism. He just recently graduated with a superintendent's determination diploma and he now attends an Access program for young adults with special needs where he does community service and continues to thrive.

Today I'd like to share two things: what it's like in a Kindergarten classroom currently, and what it's like as a parent during this pandemic.

This school year has been like no other, and, sometimes, it still feels surreal to me. There are moments when I walk down the halls of my school, peering into classrooms, and I'm struck by the sight of children in masks at their desks. My kindergarteners don't even think twice about it anymore, as it's become the new normal for all of us, and for that, I am thankful. They are flourishing, happy and healthy, but we have all seen firsthand how the vast challenges and obstacles in these unprecedented times, encountered by students, parents, and educators, have been overwhelming.

Public school teachers, administrators and school-related professionals have always gone to extraordinary lengths to provide the very best services and education for our children, but never have they had to do so under such difficult circumstances. Their remarkable commitment and never-ending dedication are to be commended and celebrated, but it's hard, and we truly need your help.

Every day I watch in awe as dedicated, outstanding educators, school related professionals, and staff members do ALL we can to serve ALL our children. Public education is our nation's greatest hope. It is the promise that all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, learning

abilities or disabilities, have a right to a free and appropriate education that will meet their diverse needs. It is public school that gives every child an equal chance to grow into a successful and flourishing member of society. A public education lays the foundation for a lifetime of opportunity and accomplishment, but while our children try to learn, and our educators try to teach, what you may not see are the struggles behind the scenes.

Lack of digital access, lack of digital equity, lack of devices, lack of and cost of PPE, the heightened and increased need for mental health support and services for students and staff, the choices districts have to make when trying to live within a tax cap and school aid levels, the shifting priorities in a school building, remote teaching and remote learning, the fears of in-person learning.

All these challenges, sadly, impede school districts from providing all they can for their students. I see amazing things happen in a school every day, despite these challenges, but it's hard, and we truly need your help.

Parents and families have now been combatting this pandemic for nearly a year. From our urban centers, to our rural communities and to everything in between.

Far longer than we could have ever imagined, we have worried and wondered. We have dealt with unemployment, underemployment, food insecurity, trauma, sickness, and mental health concerns for our children and for ourselves.

We are juggling work, family, childcare, remote learning and health concerns. At the same time, we try to figure out how to get free or low-cost Wi-Fi for learning. We try to figure out how to keep our children fed with healthy meals. We try to figure out how to keep the lights and heat on, while searching for employment.

We try to figure out how to stop our children's night terrors from the past year of trauma, how to get them the professional support they need to alleviate their fears and, worse, how to explain the loss of a loved one.

We cannot do this alone. We need a partner in our schools and a partner in you, our policy makers. New York State PTA, founded in 1897, is the oldest and largest child advocacy association in New York. It is our passion to speak up on behalf of all children and youth and we implore you to be their champions. We cannot do the work alone. Together, we will shine a light on every child, with one voice.

And now, I'm going to turn it back to Kyle Belokopitsky, our Executive Director, for some specific budget asks. Thank you for listening and for your time.

Thank you Dana.

School Aid

Overall, the proposal provides a year-to-year increase of approximately \$2.1 billion for the 2021-22 school year. This increase is due to the \$3.9 billion allocated to school districts under the federal CRRSA Act and \$400 million in previous federal funding. The federal funds offset a \$607 million decrease in state school aid support. According to the second floor, the state reductions may be restored if the state receives the requested \$15 billion Federal COVID relief funds. The proposal assumes \$6 billion in NEW federal funding and full use of previous federal funding.

Our advocacy is now critical to see that NYS receives adequate federal funding to support this increase.

But equally important – we must find ways to increase state support of our schools. Our students cannot withstand cuts to state funding and sole reliance on federal funds to succeed.

The Division of Budget previously said under the proposal, every district will either have flat funding or get a small increase, but on the runs we did not see that occur. And worse, some of our highest need students received cuts or extremely low increases.

The proposal also calls for nearly a \$400 million reduction in and consolidation of expense-based aids. The proposal consolidates eleven expense-based aid categories, currently consisting of \$3.7 billion in funding, into a new block grant called “Services Aid.” This reduction is offset by each district’s federal CRRSA allocation in the current proposal. Further growth in these current aid categories would be eliminated and would require future increases to be allocated via Foundation Aid instead of an expense-based reimbursement. NYS PTA fully opposes this change to expense-based aids.

The proposal also details a new \$1.35 billion “Local District Funding Adjustment” (LDFA). This is a reduction in state support, which is offset in this proposal by the school district’s federal CRRSA funds. This state reduction may be restored if NY receives the requested \$15 billion Federal COVID relief funds. NYS PTA fully opposes this Local District Funding Adjustment.

Also, the DOB Director has indicated that the previous 20% withholding of certain Aid payments from July, August and September 2020 will only be restored at 15%. This means 5% of those funds will be permanently cut. Again, our students, our schools cannot withstand continued cuts to education.

Further, we continue to worry about cost shifts to school districts for certain special education costs.

Pandemic Transportation costs

We appreciate that the proposal reimburses school districts for the cost of delivering school meals and instructional materials during pandemic-related school closures in spring 2020, a priority of NYS PTA.

Prior Year Aid Payments owed

The proposal proposes to eliminate \$18.7 million in funding for school districts' prior year claims and expunge all claims currently in the queue. The Executive Budget proposes eliminating the PYA queue altogether. NYS PTA fully opposes this proposal.

PreK, after-school, early college high schools, PTECH, Community Schools

We appreciate that the proposal continues current law funding levels for prekindergarten, after-school programming, early college high schools, P-TECH programs, community schools, and Smart Schools Bond Act - all priorities of NYS PTA. We continue to seek increases in all of these critical programs that truly support our children. We have a high-quality pre-k program is critical to success. Early-college high schools and P-TECH programs lead to greater graduation rates and successes in college and career.

Support for Community Schools is critical, as they continue to be an effective strategy for student and family success, and often address the health, social, and socio-emotional needs of students and their families. While we understand set-asides for community school funding, ALL schools should be afforded the opportunity to transform schools into community hubs for learning and family support and funding for any school to support this model should be included in the final State Budget.

School Funding Transparency

The proposal continues what the Governor has termed “School Funding Transparency” – this is not currently supported by NYS PTA, as funding transparency is already required under federal ESSA law.

Mental Health Support

Mental health support for our students must be of highest priority, and we continue to be concerned about the lack of adequate and dedicated funding for mental health for our students, our educators, and their families.

The pandemic has drastically increased the need for mental health services for students for many reasons – trauma, loss of loved ones, isolation, depression, anxiety. NOW is the time where we need MORE services for students, MORE counselors, social workers, psychologists and professional and support staff to see that each child, no matter their zip code, is adequately supported.

Teacher Programs

The proposal would eliminate teacher support programs, including the Teachers of Tomorrow Program, the Teacher Mentor Intern Program, and the Albert Shanker Grant Program – NYS PTA supports these programs and fully opposes these cuts.

Library Aid

The proposal unfortunately reduces funding for Library Aid by 5%, from \$91.6 million to \$87 million. This cut is not offset with federal funding. NYS opposes these cuts.

Public Broadcasting

The proposal unfortunately reduces funding for Public Broadcasting by 5%, from \$14 million to \$13.3 million. This cut is not offset with federal funding. NYS opposes these cuts.

Digital Access and Equity

The proposal requires any broadband provider to offer high speed broadband service to low-income consumers at a rate of no more than \$15 a month, including any taxes or fees. "Low-income" consumers are defined as those whose household is eligible for free or reduced priced lunch or whose annual gross household income is not above 185% of federal poverty guidelines.

We appreciate and fully support this proposal. However, we are also concerned with the actual lack of broadband access in many communities. During the pandemic, we saw schools deploying buses capable of WIFI connections to areas without broadband. This access and equity issue still needs to be addressed, and in particular many of our rural areas have no or limited access to broadband.

We also fully support Senator Mayer's E-Learn proposal, and look forward to its passage and enactment.

Tax Cap

We would be remiss if we didn't mention we are extremely concerned with this year's figure – 1.23 percent. Under the tax cap, districts have often been forced to make difficult budgeting choices in attempts to save programs and services for students. NYS PTA continues to support common sense tax cap reform, that include;

1. Changing the allowable levy limit to at least two percent or CPI, **whichever is greater;**
2. Elimination of the supermajority requirement and the possibility of negative tax levy limits;
3. Allowing for exemptions like enrollment increases; and
4. Implementation of tax cap corrections which the legislature and Governor have already approved: excluding BOCES capital expenses from calculations and including Payments in Lieu of Taxes in growth factor determinations.

English Language Learners and their families

New York is the gateway for immigrant success. Adequately supporting ELL students and their families continues to be a challenge for many districts and communities. Therefore, we ask that you continue to also consider:

1. Additional dedicated funding for ELL students, especially for school districts experiencing high density populations of diverse language speakers;

2. Improved current aid to address mid-year influxes of unaccompanied minor students, and increased support for districts with high unaccompanied minor populations;
3. Fiscal support for and examination of Part 154 implementation and requirements;
4. Accelerated teacher training for all educators in supporting ELL students and their families, along with expedited certification of bilingual and TSOL educators;
5. Continued and increased support for the State Education Department (SED) Office of Family Engagement, with staff dedicated to support ELL students and families; and
6. Expansion of the state's capacity to provide translation and interpretation services, especially for key parent documents, to minimize local district impact.

Recovery High Schools

We fully support expansion and access to recovery high school programs. While enacting language was included in previous enacted budgets, funding has not been sufficient to support students in need.

Recreational Marijuana

The proposal once again includes the legalization of recreational marijuana, creates a new Office of Cannabis Management, and attempts to balance the budget with "new" marijuana revenue. We continue to fiercely oppose these measures, as there is no amount of revenue that can possibly offset the harm of the legalization of marijuana on our children.

With the serious crisis of youth vaping and tobacco use, and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, while still battling the opioid crisis, this harmful legislation is counterintuitive.

Further, creation of a new Office of Cannabis Management, while at the same time cutting state school aid is unconscionable. The Executive Budget Proposal shows hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts of state support to our public schools. Why would the proposal then spend scarce resources on proposals that would actually physically and mentally harm our children?

Please heed the recommendations from leading medical and public health organizations, education groups, and the law enforcement community and do NOT legalize recreational marijuana.

In 2017, the American Medical Association concluded cannabis is a dangerous drug and a serious public health concern, and that the sale of cannabis for recreational use should not be legalized.

In 2015, the American Academy of Pediatrics reaffirmed its opposition to legalizing recreational marijuana.

Further, the American Lung Association is clear, "Smoking marijuana clearly damages the human lung, and regular use leads to chronic bronchitis and can cause an immune-compromised person to be more susceptible to lung infections. No one should be exposed to secondhand marijuana smoke. Due to the risks it poses to lung health, the American Lung Association

strongly cautions the public against smoking marijuana as well as tobacco products.” In November 2020, UCLA researchers found “smoking ... causes more severe infection by SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, in the airways of the lungs.”

The Mayo Clinic offered in November 2020 that “ ... we know from the previous coronavirus outbreaks, especially the MERS outbreak, that smokers were more susceptible to infection and more likely to get more serious infection ... the reasonable assumption is that because of those injuries to local defenses and the information we have from other respiratory infections, people who smoke will be at more risk for more serious COVID-19 infection and more likely to get even critical disease and have to be hospitalized.”

In Conclusion

Every parent and family have a dream for their children. It is our job to be dream makers, ensuring every child, no matter their zip code, no matter their ethnicity, no matter their ability, no matter their gender identity, no matter their race, has the highest quality 21st century education to lead them to success in college, career or life.

We humbly ask that you continue to advocate for infusing our schools with the tools and resources necessary to accelerate the success of our children and families. Together, we can Shine a Light on Every Child, and make every child’s potential a reality. No other work is more important.