

TESTIMONY ON BEHALF OF LOCAL 372 | NYC BOARD OF EDUCATION EMPLOYEES
DISTRICT COUNCIL 37 | AFSCME
TO THE JOINT ASSEMBLY AND SENATE MENTAL HYGIENE BUDGET HEARING
FEBRUARY 5, 2021
9:30 AM

Good morning, Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, and distinguished members of the New York State Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee. We are Kevin Allen, Chapter Chair, and Donna Tilghman, Chapter Secretary, and we thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Governor's proposed Mental Hygiene budget. We speak today on behalf of President Shaun D. Francois I. and the approximately 270 Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention Specialists ("SAPIS") represented by Local 372 NYC Board of Education Employees, DC 37, who operate in the New York City public school system. SAPIS counselors are currently funded by the legislature through a joint \$2,000,000 appropriation and we are here today seeking an increase of \$1,000,000 for a total of \$3,000,000 in joint legislative appropriations for SAPIS.

Our students are facing a mental health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a recent CDC report, the proportion of children's mental health-related visits to Emergency Departments has skyrocketed since April 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the virtualization of many aspects of students' lives. The CDC report concluded that it is critical to monitor children's mental health, promote coping and resilience, and expand access to services to support children's mental health. The SAPIS program is the best-equipped to shoulder this responsibility.

Since 1971, SAPIS have provided essential social-emotional strategies and services to help youth remain learning-ready. The SAPIS program is an established, certified service that is sponsored by OASAS to provide Evidence-Based Program ("EBP") presentations, group and individual counseling, and positive alternatives to NYC public school students, servicing K-12 throughout all of New York City's 32 school districts, including special education. This includes classroom presentations and counseling for mental health services and crisis mitigation in the individual and group settings; and more.

We can honestly – and proudly – state that SAPIS counselors are already trained and ready to respond to this COVID-19 mental health crisis. SAPIS have *always* been proactive in providing students and their families with the tools to navigate the myriad of societal, personal, and peer pressures that can derail healthy academic, social, and individual development. SAPIS counselors are also responsible for monitoring behavior, as well as offering resources and services to support students when they find themselves struggling to improve. Our programming is already tailored to address the long-term consequences of the pandemic and shutdown which are derailing healthy development.

Local 372 has long testified to this panel about the devastating effects of cuts to the SAPIS program and the loss of over 200 SAPIS counselors since 2006. Now more than ever, there are simply not enough SAPIS today to address the needs of all of our at-risk children and their families. This is not acceptable, and the SAPIS program needs more boots on the ground. It is estimated that each individual SAPIS counselor can directly reach approximately 500 at-risk students. Our requested increase of \$1 million (for a total of \$3 million) in SAPIS funding would support the equivalent of an additional twelve full-time SAPIS positions, which would create lifelines for up to 6,000 more students in need. Without SAPIS, we are robbing these struggling students of their opportunity to a quality, competitive education, and ultimately, their futures.

To that end, the NYC Department of Education is not currently prioritizing our existing SAPIS assets or strengths to meet the increased demand for more Social-Emotional Learning curricula, turning instead to less effective and more costly alternatives. For example, Mayor de Blasio, First Lady McCray, and Chancellor Carranza recently announced a “2021 Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan” to address the mental health crisis that instead proposes the hiring of school social workers and community-based organizations to effectively duplicate the work that SAPIS counselors already provide.

However, it is in the students’ best interest that the State and City prioritize their investments in expanding the existing SAPIS program before considering contracting with outside entities or hiring social workers to perform our work. First, SAPIS provide mandatory programming to students in the classroom setting, as opposed to the voluntary programs offered by community-

based organizations after school. Second, SAPIS are more versatile and cost-effective as compared to social workers, whom are not trained to provide the same broad range of one-on-one and group-based services and programming. It is also more cost effective to hire a SAPIS than it is to hire a social worker. It costs approximately \$50,500 in base salary, plus 49% in fringe benefits, to hire a single SAPIS. After two years of service, the base salary increases 15%. In contrast, hiring a new social worker costs approximately \$63,000 plus fringe benefits. With these facts in mind, it simply makes no sense *not* to invest in SAPIS.

Local 372's goal is to partner with the State in making a smart investment in the quality of life for both New York students, their families, and communities at-large. Even in the midst of a pandemic, it remains our shared responsibility to ensure our children meet and exceed their potential. And the legislature has always been a leader in prioritizing opportunities for our children. For the past six years, the legislature has allocated \$2 million annually towards SAPIS. On behalf of Local 372, we thank both the Senate and Assembly for your ongoing support for SAPIS, and for your recognition that New York City's students need access to the resources and services that SAPIS counselors provide. However, we must do more to combat today's urgent mental health crisis. That is why Local 372 requests that the legislature contribute an additional \$1 million towards SAPIS in this year's budget, for a total allocation of \$3 million in funding. We look forward to working with all of you to make this possible.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear on behalf of Local 372 NYC Board of Education Employees and our SAPIS counselors. We are available to answer any questions you all may have.