

School Administrators Association of New York State

SAANYS
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Testimony of the

School Administrators Association of New York State

Joint Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2022-23

Elementary and Secondary Education Executive Budget Proposal

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Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Weinstein, Chairperson Mayer, Chairperson Benedetto, honorable members of the legislature and distinguished staff, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on funding for elementary and secondary education contained in the executive budget proposal for the fiscal year 2022-23.

My name is Cynthia Gallagher and I serve as the director of government relations for the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS). SAANYS is the largest state professional association of school administrators, whose membership has grown to over 8,000 building administrators and program directors across the state. We represent members in 428 school districts from the eastern, western, southern, and northern parts of the state. Additionally, SAANYS and the New York State Federation of School Administrators (NYSFSA) have a longstanding coalition – the New York State School Administrators Consortium (NYSSAC). This coalition includes building and program leaders in the Big 5 districts, as well as other districts, and together we provide strong advocacy and professional learning opportunities. On behalf of our members, we want to thank you for your continued commitment and support of public education.

The 2021-22 school year has continued to challenge building leaders and program directors across the state with new and complex issues. Given the steep learning experiences over the past two years, leaders still could not have anticipated the new problems that the beginning of the school year brought. During the first few days of the pandemic in 2020, administrators stood in their buildings and today they are still standing, every morning, at those same doors, however, they are stressed and weary, as are all educators. In addition to their role as building administrators, they have added responsibilities such as public health contact tracers, substitute teachers, crossing guards, student monitors, and cafeteria workers. Each day starts early and

continues well into the evening. Most everyone has been dealing with pandemic fatigue and our building administrators continue to provide support for the entire school community. Today, with deep respect, I provide testimony on their behalf.

SAANYS is appreciative of the extensive outreach to building administrators across the state that our legislators have made during this past year. We know that you have heard their concerns, challenges, and frustrations. You cannot wave a magic wand to end the pandemic, but you have steered the state in a way that begins to set our schools in a better position as we ,hopefully come out of the pandemic. Through your tireless advocacy at the federal level, New York received an influx of federal funding that was much needed. We are very pleased that the legislature and governor have responded by lifting some fiscal burdens from the shoulders of our building administrators.

State Aid

SAANYS is very pleased and supportive of the approximate 7 percent increase to state aid for school districts. The ability to provide this funding, as well as ensure that all school districts receive at least a 3 percent increase is most helpful. Additionally, the increase and stability to expense-based aids is most welcomed. In prior years, this category of aid was often adjusted or frequently modified. The increases to state aid provides stability that has not been recognized in quite some time.

Foundation Aid

The increases to foundation aid and the commitment to drive funding through the statutory formula has provided relief and stability. In addition to current year funding increases, the utilization of the statutory formula will help districts predict allocations for the next school year.

In an environment where little can be predicted, this alone is a significant relief. Whether additional costs will still be needed for shifting instructional programs due to pandemic resurgences, or whether schools will be planning for post-pandemic needs, districts will be able to plan and build. A stable and utilized foundation aid formula provides an anchor in what has felt like quicksand.

One item within the foundation aid formula that remains problematic, is the \$250 million set aside for the community schools program. This program is well received and continues to be a promising model for integrating community services. However, the funding remains restricted to only some districts, and should be available to all districts.

Last year, SAANYS stated in our written testimony that “regardless of the fiscal climate, a predictable foundation aid formula must be maintained,” and that continues to be our position this year. SAANYS is supportive of continuing the process that Senator Mayer initiated when she held statewide forums to seek input on how the foundation aid formula needed to be revised. One of the first recommendations heard around the state was to actually utilize the formula and that has been accomplished in the proposed executive budget. We urge the continued examination of the foundation aid to ensure that it is directed to districts based on need and to ensure that the appropriate variables are included within the formula. Foundation aid needs to meet the needs of all school districts. This means ensuring that our lowest wealth districts receive sufficient funding, and it also means ensuring the formula keeps pace with the consumer price index and inflation rates. SAANYS stands ready to be a part of this process and to ensure that districts receive sufficient funding, and that it is appropriately directed to schools.

Mental Health

Last month the National Association of Secondary School Principals (December 2021; <https://www.nassp.org/news/nassp-survey-signals-a-looming-mass-exodus-of-principals-from-schools/>) released the results of a national survey of principals on topics related to the pandemic. The results indicated that the three top challenges identified by principals during the pandemic were:

- implementing remote and blended learning (60%),
- providing mental health supports to students (59%) and,
- providing mental health supports to teachers and staff (58%).

Embedded within this survey were results indicating that 49 percent of the respondents were “extremely concerned” about student mental health, and further only 20 percent strongly agreed that there was sufficient mental health supports and services available to support students.

A SAANYS survey conducted prior to the pandemic, also found that the mental health needs of students were identified as a high priority by building administrators and program directors. As educators, we consistently continue to raise red flags, but as of yet, have not had a fully-focused statewide response.

In fact, over the course of the last three school years, it almost seems as if the systems of mental health and education have collided, rather than collaborated. This observation does not reflect on the persons working within the state agencies, local county health departments, or in schools, but is a reflection on the two systems that not have established a coordinated response to the needs of students. One of the strongest frustrations voiced by our building administrators, has been the additional work that has been created because the local health departments did not have

sufficient resources and inconsistent guidance that has been provided across the state. Many building administrators report that contact tracing took up half of their day, and would extend into the late evening hours as they try to catch family members and parents who work in different shifts. They have also been frustrated by guidance that has been released by the end of one week, for implementation by the following week.

The proposed executive budget does include \$100 million for a Recovery from COVID School Program (RECOVS), \$2 million for Positive School Climates and other smaller funding opportunities for such things as school adjustments in the early grades, health services to the Big Four cities, and continued funding for the School Mental Health Resource Center. Each of these programs are needed support, however, these efforts do not provide a coordinated approach or sustainable level of funding needed to address the mental health needs of students and staff.

A reimagined system to address the mental health needs of students, must be more unified and comprehensive. Fifty-eight local departments of health, working with 731 school districts, with some school districts in the jurisdiction of multiple counties, has not been a model for effective service delivery. The pandemic has underscored the fragmentation and unsustainable nature of the current systems whose goal is to provide and support students with mental health needs. A closer look at how these systems intersect, and how those points of intersection could become more coordinated, will be necessary in order for us to effectively move into a post pandemic era. The goals of both systems are similar and the two fields, are closely connected. Professionals in both fields often have similar training and the work is often geared to the same students. Our post pandemic reviews will need to find ways to drive funding to encourage collaboration.

Early Care and Education

The governor's budget presentations and subsequent press conferences underscored the importance of childcare and early education. These fields are seen as both economic drivers and educational priorities. If our economy is to thrive, it is necessary for parents to be able to access childcare services that are affordable, accessible, and available. The governor has proposed that childcare subsidies be expanded by increasing eligibility for families, as well as incentive proposals for childcare workers. In fact, the governor proposed that childcare be available at all SUNY and CUNY sites. SAANYS supports these efforts and would urge the governor and legislature to build upon these types of initiatives.

However, at the same time the Universal Prekindergarten Program (UPK) was funded with only a slight increase. After almost twenty-six years in existence, not every school district is eligible to receive funding. If all school districts had been able to provide UPK from the beginning, there would have been over a decade of graduating prekindergarten students. The governor has shown a willingness and an understanding of the importance of accessing childcare, from birth to age 4, and providing prekindergarten and kindergarten. As the New York State economy continues to thrive, it provides an opportunity to ensure that all four-year-olds have access to UPK and that full-day kindergarten becomes a required component of the K-12 educational system.

Professional Development

SAANYS continues to advocate for funding to support the professional development of building administrators and program directors. Over the past two years, building administrators provided professional development for instructional staff and had very little time for their own professional development. Understanding their position, SAANYS responded by providing the

rapid delivery and focused topics directly to the desks of building administrators. By maximizing the use of Zoom and other digital platforms, SAANYS provided opportunities for colleagues to share best practices, meet regionally, and access the most current state agency guidelines or regulations. This year, we expanded topics and formats to address in depth discussions on diversity, inclusion and integration, and mental health support.

We appreciate the funding provided for our building administrators thus far and would request that such funding be continued.

Reserve Funds

As the governor provided overviews of the proposed executive budget and as Dr. Majica provided further details, one of the key components of the proposed budget was the opportunity to expand and grow reserve funds. SAANYS concurs with this fiscal practice and would encourage consideration to expanding the level at which school districts can reserve funds. The proposed budget anticipates moving to 15 percent of spending by 2024. Such a reserve begins to provide the necessary funds for unique situations that may arise in the future. School districts have made good use of reserve funds and increasing the levels at which districts could reserve funds should be considered.

Career and Technical Education

The pandemic changed how we work, in ways that may last well after recovery from the pandemic itself. E-commerce grew rapidly, consumer behavior has changed, and businesses have shifted to remote work in virtual meetings. Digital automation and practices such as curbside delivery emerged rapidly. Currently, health care and retail sectors are anticipated to show the greatest productivity growth through 2024. (McKinsey Reports)

The governor stated a goal to unlock more career options for New Yorkers for jobs of their future, and decreasing funding for technical and career education programs is inconsistent with this goal. SAANYS would support increasing funding for these programs.

Waive the Income Cap for Retired Teachers and School Workers

In order to address educator shortages, the proposed budget would allow retired persons to return to work in schools without impacting their pension status. This provision would expire in June, 2024. SAANYS strongly supports this provision and welcomes such efforts to support schools as they experience staff shortages. In the recent NASSP survey cited above, 38 percent of the principals completing the survey indicated that they would be leaving their positions within three years. It is important that we continue to seek ways to alleviate the impending shortage of building administrators and program directors.

Fiscal Support for the New York State Education Department

Within the state operations component of the proposed budget, funding is included to support the functions of the New York State Education Department (NYSED). This funding is important as NYSED has not received sufficient funding to support staffing positions that enable them to carryout services important to our schools.

Transfer of the National School Lunch Program

SAANYS does not support the transfer of components of the school lunch program from the New York State Education Department to the Department of Agriculture and Markets. SAANYS membership includes administrators who oversee the school lunch program. Responses from our members indicate that this would not be beneficial to school operations. Our school districts have

been satisfied with SED's oversight of the program and have established relations within the department. SED's oversight is effective and has not been problematic. The department and school districts have the necessary data base and processes in place for the school lunch programs to operate effectively. Changes to the current program are not necessary and should not be considered, as districts are far too overextended to adjust any unnecessary changes.

On behalf of the School Administrators Association of New York State, thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on the proposed executive budget. Your consideration to our requests and concerns is appreciated. We stand ready to be an active partner in improving the programs and services needed to support the students and schools of New York State.