



THE 853 COALITION

# *TESTIMONY*

Joint Legislative Hearing of the New York State

ASSEMBLY WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

&

SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

On Executive Budget Proposals for Education

SFY 2022-2023

Wednesday, January 26, 2022

*NYS COALITION OF 853 SCHOOLS*

*Kathleen Brady-Stepien, President & CEO*

The New York State Coalition of 853 Schools

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Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Kathleen Brady-Stepien. I am the President and CEO of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies and the New York State Coalition of 853 Schools.

## **TUITION RATE METHODOLOGY**

To begin, I would like to express our membership's appreciation for your long-standing support of school age special education schools, otherwise known as "853 schools." Ten years ago, after 6 years of zero percent growth to our funding, the Legislature recognized the need to advocate for our students during the budget process rather than rely on the Executive's administrative tuition rate process. It is because of your advocacy that students with disabilities educated in 853 schools began to be supported on par with their peers attending public schools.

Last year, when the prior administration broke with past practice and failed to approve growth for our students on par with the public school districts, this Legislative body responded and unanimously passed legislation to require that annual growth to the tuition rate methodology be authorized at the same level as growth provided to public school districts. While this legislation was ultimately vetoed by Governor Hochul, we appreciate that your leadership and support led to a commitment in this year's Executive Budget for an 11% COLA, a growth factor to be applied to our tuition rate methodology in the upcoming school year.

Your advocacy remains critical today. This one-time 11% investment will not strengthen the fiscal viability of our schools until comprehensive tuition rate methodology reform is realized and a commitment to growth on par with school aid growth is made to our special education students. Our Coalition has long advocated for reforms to the special education tuition rate methodology, which is currently unable to appropriately support the education and related services our students are entitled to and deserve. As you well know, our schools are struggling to recruit and retain special education teachers and staff, and costs have increased. Our students' needs must be met through a strong partnership with the state in addressing under-funding and the challenges inherent in the tuition rate methodology.

The Coalition is recommending short term amendments to the tuition rate methodology to protect against negative impacts of fluctuations in revenues and expenses related to the pandemic, as well as the significant workforce challenges our schools face. In tandem with these short term amendments, we are requesting that the Legislature support the New York State Education Department's request for funds to reform the tuition rate

methodology. Any such investment would need to include a commitment to work closely with the special education providers, our schools, in the development of a new methodology and a specific timeframe for the adoption and implementation of reforms.

### **WORKFORCE CHALLENGES**

Like many other sectors, our schools are facing significant recruitment and retention challenges. These difficulties pre-dated the pandemic, and have certainly been exacerbated by the pandemic. The current tuition rate methodology does not support our schools in compensating our teachers and staff at the same or similar level as public school districts. We simply cannot recruit and retain qualified certified teachers, teaching assistants, teacher aides and other clinical staff, given their ability to earn a higher salary and better benefits package in public schools. This is compounded by the shortages in the workforce generally and shortages specifically in certain related service areas like speech language pathologists and certification areas like special education and early education.

The Coalition recommends a targeted comprehensive investment strategy focused on increasing the compensation of our teachers, clinicians, and staff so we can deliver the educational opportunity our students deserve. By working with the New York State Education Department and the Division of the Budget, we should be able to identify benchmark investment that can align our salaries across the P-12 educational sector.

### **CONCLUSION**

Once again, thank you for your support of our students, families, and staff. We look forward to working with you to advance proposals in this year's budget that will finally put us on a path to real tuition rate methodology reform that allows for appropriate investment in our students' needs, and appropriately compensated certified teachers, staff, and related services professionals. Thank you.