



**Submitted Testimony of Lena Bilik, Senior Policy Analyst at Children's Aid
Legislative Hearing on 2022-2023 Executive Budget Proposal:
Elementary and Secondary Education
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Thank you to Senator Krueger, Assemblymember Weinstein, Senator Mayer, Assemblymember Benedetto, and to the other members of the Finance, Ways and Means, and Education Committees for the opportunity to present testimony to you today.

Children's Aid and Community Schools

For 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 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 our nearly 2,000 full and part time staff members empower 40,000 children, youth and their families through our citywide child welfare and family services and 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. Children's Aid is a member of the Campaign for Children, the New York State Network for Youth Success, the New York State Community Schools Network, and the New York City Coalition for Community School Excellence, and as a member of these networks and alliances we are in support of their policy agendas. Together, we are on a mission to connect children with what they need to learn, grow, and lead successful, independent lives.

For over 25 years, Children's Aid has operated community schools in partnership with the New York City Department of Education. We believe the community schools strategy effectively removes the barriers to learning that get in the way of youth success – both academically and socially—and we believe this strategy is more needed than ever right now. Community schools act as community hubs that offer holistic, integrated services that acknowledge the needs of the whole child. New York City community schools use the CBO-partner model, where nonprofits like Children's Aid partner with schools and work closely with their school partners and educators to offer integrated support that responds to the specific needs of the students and the entire school community. At our community schools, we work with the school community to integrate expanded learning programs, comprehensive health services (physical, mental health, dental, and vision), and family engagement strategies into the school building.

Currently, Children's Aid partners with 20 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 programs and school strategy 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 height of the pandemic's impact in the school year 2020-2021, Children's Aid (CA) was able to pivot to working with students and families with a combination of remote and in-person services. When schools were closed we offered virtual after-school programming, mental health services using tele-health technology, targeted academic supports and college/career coaching. When schools reopened for in-person learning, CA immediately stepped in to provide crucial mental health services on an in-person basis for students attending classes on site; we also maintained remote mental health counseling as an option throughout the year because of the immense need. Additionally, we were able to provide in-person medical services at our six school-based health centers. Our students whose schools did not have a school-based health center received referrals for both in-person and tele-health services from our community-based health clinics and other providers in our network of local partners.

The COVID-19 crisis continues to have a profound impact on the families in our community schools, which are located in some of the neighborhoods in New York City hit hardest by the pandemic and its associated economic downturn. Many of the assessments we conducted showed us that families have needed support with basic needs. As community schools, we were equipped to quickly respond. For example, food insecurity consistently emerged as one of the most pressing issues affecting families. To address this, community school staff partnered with CA's Go!Healthy program to mount multiple food access initiatives which distributed thousands of meals and grocery boxes throughout the year. We also continued to stock food pantries at multiple community school sites, while also opening a new food pantry in one of our South Bronx community schools. Additionally, with many caregivers experiencing unemployment, we were able to leverage funds to assist families in our community schools pay for food and essential supplies like diapers and formula, rental assistance, utility bills, mobile devices, and internet service. We also ramped up services geared toward parents and families, including virtual workshops on government benefits, workforce development, COVID-19 relief resources, social emotional skills, and employment assistance.

Children's Aid as a community school partner has been able to provide invaluable support to our schools with these responsive, holistic services that are more vital than ever, as the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis have exacerbated existing racial and socioeconomic inequity in the communities we work in. This was also the case in community schools all over New York City and State. **In this critical period for young people and communities, New York State must make bold investments in the community schools strategy.** The strategy is well equipped to empower schools across the state to create and offer a network of resources that youth and families can turn to when experiencing the relentless challenges that have permeated this crisis. The community schools strategy is designed to help address a multitude of these challenges – it is not *only* a mental health strategy, an



academic strategy, or an equity strategy for education – it is *all* of those things and more, providing much needed support on everything from food insecurity to interrupted learning to the grief that comes with losing a loved one.

Budget Recommendations

As a steering committee member of the New York State Community Schools Network (NYSCSN) we are advocating for the network's budget requests, as well as those of our other coalitions that advocate for programs that can be leveraged in the school building for children and families.

We are pleased to see that the Executive Budget maintains \$250 million in the Community Schools set-aside of Foundation Aid included in last year's budget, and we support maintaining that \$250 million in existing community school funding. But given the incredible need to invest in whole-child education right now, **we urge the State to dedicate an additional and separate \$100 million in a new Community Schools Categorical Aid to adequately fund and sustain community schools statewide.**

The Community Schools Categorical Aid would allow New York schools to adopt, increase, and sustain the transformative impact of community schools on student learning outcomes and communities across New York State. There has never been more need for this kind of holistic, social-emotional approach to schooling. Now is the time for New York State to continue to be a leader and grow the strategy to reach more young people and communities.

We also ask for the State to **increase the \$1.2 million investment in Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) by \$800,000 for a total appropriation of \$2 million annually through 2023.**

School districts and community partners must receive the necessary support and implementation assistance to ensure their efforts are successful at a time when there is growing demand for their services. An additional \$800,000 would provide funding for each of the three TACs to expand staff and enhance existing capacity for on-site and virtual technical assistance and coaching. This will also allow for an annual "statewide" convening for community school directors or district representatives with networking opportunities and resource sharing. Increased capacity will also allow for additional support of new partners, including BOCES, looking to establish community schools, and increase coordination across various stakeholders currently addressing learning interruption for students. Finally, increased funding will allow for the creation of a \$100,000 set-aside for Department administration to increase staff capacity and support.

In summary, we recommend that the Legislature:

- **Expand community schools by investing \$100 million in a new and dedicated Community Schools Categorical Aid to adequately fund, expand, and sustain community schools statewide.**
- **Increase the \$1.2 million investment in Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) by \$800,000 for a total of \$2 million.**
- **Maintain \$250 million in existing community school funding through the set aside.**

Recognizing the promise of community schools:

- In a [RAND report](#) published in January of 2020, New York City's community schools were found to have markedly positive impacts on students and communities, including a



positive impact on student attendance in all school levels and across all three years of the study, a reduction in disciplinary incidents for elementary and middle school students, and had a positive impact on math achievement and credit accumulation.

- New York City significantly expanded 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, and plans to expand its initiative (the largest in the country) by 100 schools in 2023.
- The American Rescue Plan named community schools as an allowable use of federal education stimulus dollars to address learning loss due to the pandemic, which the City has utilized in their expansion plans.
- Multiple national education think tanks and organizations, from the [Brookings Institute](#) to the [Learning Policy Institute](#) to the [Hechinger Report](#), have called for the community schools approach to be expanded when considering roadmaps for transforming education in this moment.

Additional Recommendations

In our community schools work, we have found that several targeted services and strategies are important factors that can work together 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. Currently, across all our community schools and centers, Children's Aid serves over 3,000 young people in afterschool and expanded learning programs. 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 9 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 requests:

- **Afterschool, Summer, and Expanded Learning Programs.** Protect baseline funding for the Advantage After School Program (\$5 million restoration) and Youth Development Program (\$1.5 million restoration), and provide bridge investment of \$169 million to align current per student rate of state afterschool programs with a base true cost rate of \$4,300 for one year. Provide line-item funding of \$250,000 to the NYS Network for Youth Success to provide technical assistance supports for afterschool. Also, amend the statutory per-student rate of the Empire State After-School Program to align with the base true cost rate and include flexibility to modify future rates as needed to reflect minimum wage adjustments.
- **Early Childhood Education.** We support the requests of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, including: taking large steps toward achieving universal child care by expanding access to child care subsidies for child care and school-age child care for lower-income New York families regardless of employment or immigration status (\$2.8B); raising child care workforce compensation, and increasing provider reimbursement rates (\$500M); and transitioning to a payment rate model that accounts for geography, quality, and assumes all child care staff are paid at parity with elementary school teachers (\$600M). Expansion should be funded from



remaining CRSSA/ARPA child care COVID relief funds, unrestricted ARPA funds, existing CCDBG funds, Build Back Better (projected), state tax revenues, and a possible employer-side payroll tax.

Additionally, we were encouraged to see Governor Hochul's RECOVS plan introduced in the executive budget. We are seeing with our own eyes the mental health needs of our young people right now and are bolstered by the Governor's commitment to addressing this. To maximize this plan, we suggest requiring school districts receiving new RECOVS Learning and Mental Health grants to demonstrate mutual collaboration with at least one community-based afterschool, youth and/or family serving organization, and/or mental health partner to help students recover academically. We know firsthand that schools should not have to do this work alone, and that CBO-school partnerships can create transformative opportunities and supports for young people.

Closing

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 one way to do that is to invest in schools as hubs of coordinated, holistic 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.