



**Submitted Testimony of Lena Bilik, Senior Policy Analyst at Children's Aid
Legislative Hearing on 2023-24 Executive Budget Proposal:
Elementary and Secondary Education**

Thank you to Education Chairs Senator Mayer and Assemblymember Benedetto, and to Finance Committee Chair Senator Krueger and Ways and Means Committee Chair Assemblymember Weinstein as well as the Finance, Ways and Means, and Education Committees for the opportunity to present testimony to you on elementary and secondary education in the 2023-24 State Budget.

For 170 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 50,000 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. In the education space, 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, the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, 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.

Children's Aid and Community Schools

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 builds on students' strengths and removes the barriers to learning that can get in the way of youth success – both academically and socially, and emotionally—and we believe this strategy is more needed than ever right now. Community schools act as community hubs that offer holistic, integrated services that organize the school around student success and 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, behavioral 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, behavioral health services and counseling, parent workshops, family events, and many others. Children's Aid as the lead partner coordinates the programs and school strategy at the school level; advocates for the students' and school's needs; brings in additional resources, programs, and services; conducts needs assessments and supports 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 (in other parts of the state called a community school coordinator) to coordinate with school leadership and ensure resources, programming, and services are integrated, both during the school day and during extended learning time.

This past school year has been a critical time for helping young people get back on track to succeed and thrive after the disruptions of the pandemic. And we've seen this important work in action at our community schools this past year. All but two of our 20 community schools saw improvements in chronic absence last year, despite [the current](#) high rates of chronic absenteeism across the city, state, and nation. Over 90% of students at our high schools who applied to college were accepted, and 100% of Spring 2022 graduates at our high schools completed a post-secondary plan. At one school alone, CS 211 in the Bronx, social workers engaged youth in 299 de-escalation sessions, 88 peer-mediation sessions, 64 crisis interventions, and 40 group counseling sessions in school-year 2022. We saw increases in social emotional learning at 4 of our schools, through the DESSA assessment through the DOE in school-year 2022. Between July 2021 and June 2022, across our 6 community schools where we operate School-Based Health Centers, we provided 313 young people with 2,540 behavioral health services, and 648 young people with 1,563 dental services, on top of basic first aid and medical care. We were also able to assist 708 young people with reproductive health visits. In the 2022 school year, we were able to provide 7,835 food boxes and 6,400 meals.

Children's Aid as a community school partner has been able to provide invaluable support to our schools with responsive, holistic services that are more vital than ever, as the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis have caused a crisis in youth behavior health and interrupted learning, and have exacerbated existing racial and socioeconomic inequity in the communities we work in. [We know that the interrupted learning of the pandemic has impacted all young people; we also know that low-income and students of color were the most impacted.](#) Our community schools in our target neighborhoods level the playing field so that the racial and economic inequities that already existed in education won't continue to be further worsened by the pandemic.

This is the case in community schools all over New York City and State. The partnerships core to the community schools strategy are solely needed right now; schools cannot do this work alone. **In this critical period for young people and communities, New York State must make bold investments in the community schools strategy, an evidence-based strategy that has been proven to address all of the**

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major challenges facing students at this moment. 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 attendance 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.** Dedicated funding for community schools would allow school districts, BOCES, and community partners to target and maximize resources toward specific activities and interventions that align with community schools' principles. An established community schools fund would support school districts that do not have a Community Schools Set-Aside as part of their school aid, and/or those that need further support utilizing the community schools strategy. These funds would help prioritize the hiring of a Community Schools coordinator/director, whose leadership and coordination role is focal to the community schools strategy. These funds would also increase the capacity of school districts to integrate comprehensive programs, structures, and systems that help meet the holistic needs of students equitably. Having dedicated funding would help foster purposeful coordination and evaluation of the impact of community schools in New York. Adopting a distribution model similar to the Universal Prekindergarten grant distribution formula would allow the state to maximize funds while providing equitable resources for school districts to leverage the community schools strategy effectively.

We also ask for the State to **increase the \$1.2 million investment in Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) by \$1 million for a total appropriation of \$2.2 million annually through 2023.** An increased investment totaling \$2.2 million would help expand and strengthen the capacity of CSTACs in New York. Currently, the three CSTACs are stretched thin to provide support to a wide geographic range. The additional funds would:

- Increase the staff capacity of each existing CSTAC to provide technical assistance to existing community schools across the state.
- Strengthen support for new partners, including Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), looking to establish community schools.
- Add at least one new CSTACs to increase capacity to cover statewide and also provide specialized support, including to rural school districts.



- Coordinate an annual statewide convening to share best practices and engage community schools and education leaders.
- Increase capacity of CSTACs to engage in virtual and hybrid visits across the state.

In summary, we are lifting up the New York State Network for Community Schools' recommendations 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 \$1 million.
- We support the Executive Budget's proposal to maintain the \$250 million in existing community school funding through the set aside.

Community Schools are Evidence-Based:

- Exciting [new research](#) conducted by the RAND Corporation with Vanderbilt using the largest data set of community schools of any previous study shows what we already knew from our work on the ground - that NYC Community Schools have a positive impact on **K-8 academic achievement** with statistically significant improvements in both ELA and Math scores, as well as significant improvement in **attendance**.
- 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 **credit accumulation**.
- Research and evaluation show that community schools are a smart investment in the coordination of resources at both the school and system levels, which translates to a return on investment (ROI) [of over \\$7 for every \\$1 invested](#) in a coordinator's salary. The Rome Connected Community Schools program in New York [reported](#) an even higher ROI upward of \$20 for every \$1 invested in community school initiatives.
- 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. [The White House has championed community schools](#) in their own education policy agenda as well.
- 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 at this time.

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 operates afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs. Early childhood education is also a crucial investment, and we know that New York State depends on a strong, stable system of high-quality early childhood education which nurtures and educates children and makes it possible for parents to go to work. Children's Aid provides early childhood education programs for 663 infants, toddlers and preschoolers across a total of nine sites, four of which are in public schools.

Community schools effectively leverage multiple funding streams at the school site to efficiently meet school community needs. These programs are not only a part of the scaffolding of community schools, but they are critical for ensuring an equitable recovery for young people and families across the state. We support the following priorities for these programs:

- o Afterschool, Summer, and Expanded Learning Programs: Restore \$5M cut to the Advantage After School Program. Invest \$219M in a new Afterschool Learning and Enrichment Program (ALEP) initiative to consolidate and increase the per student rate of the Empire State and Advantage afterschool programs to \$4,300. Dedicate \$500,000 to the NYS Network for Youth Success to provide technical assistance and quality supports for afterschool programs statewide. Increase professional development support and coordination of afterschool programs.
- o Early Childhood Education: We support the [requests](#) of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care for the governor and legislature to transform child care. Continue the momentum in full day pre-K by investing \$250 million.
- o School-Based Health Centers (SBHC): Permanently carve-out SBHCs from Medicaid Managed Care and increase funding for school-based health centers by \$6 million.
- o Mental Health: Maintain the \$250,000 allocated to mental health grants to support community schools in New York.

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 integrated, holistic services 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.

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