



Citizens' Committee for Children *of* NEW YORK

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Citizens' Committee for Children of New York is a 76-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization. CCC does not accept or receive public resources, provide direct services, nor represent a sector or workforce; our priority is improving outcomes for children and families through research and advocacy. We document the facts, engage and mobilize New Yorkers, and advocate for solutions to ensure that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe.

We would like to thank Chairs Weinstein and Krueger, as well as Chairs Mayer, Benedetto, and Liu, and all the members of the Assembly Ways and Means, Senate Finance, Senate and Assembly Education Committees, and the Senate's New York City Education Committee for holding today's Joint Hearing today and allowing us the opportunity to respond to Governor Hochul's Executive Budget.

School Funding

In order to ensure an equitable education for students across New York State, schools must receive equitable funding. In 2006, the State Court of Appeals ruled that New York State was violating students' constitutional right to a "sound and basic education" by leaving schools without the necessary and fair funding. As a result, Foundation Aid was created to ensure schools would receive a \$5.5 billion increase in basic operating aid over the course of four years (2007 to 2011). Due to a state budget crisis in 2009 and COVID-19 in 2020, the funding of Foundation Aid has faced many delays. However, in 2021, the State committed to a new three-year phase-in to fully fund Foundation Aid. This budget season should mark the final year of that phase-in.

CCC was pleased to see and strongly supports the Governor's proposal in the Executive Budget to invest \$2.7 billion – a 12.8 percent increase – to complete the three-year phase-in of Foundation Aid and bring total funding to \$24.1 billion. We further support the

Governor’s proposal to allocate \$250 million of this funding to a statewide tutoring program in grades 3-8 to address learning loss.

Universal School Meals

1 in 7 kids in New York experience hunger, disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx children.¹ Children experiencing hunger struggle to focus in school, have lower attendance, and are at greater risk of mental and physical health problems that can impede academic achievement.

During the pandemic, the federal government provided free school meals to all students in public schools. This was a welcome relief for families struggling with food insecurity due to job and income loss and the rising prices in groceries driven by inflation. However, the expiration of federal funding for free school meals has hurt students and families across New York, resulting in more than 726,000 students and nearly 2,000 schools losing access to free school meals.²

CCC and our statewide partners urge the Governor, Senate, and Assembly to establish and fund universal school meals in the FY24 State Budget.

Universal school meals provide a way for all school children in New York to have access to breakfast and lunch at no cost to the student and their families. This program will eliminate the stigma attached to eligibility for free or reduced meals, and will eliminate the burden for families who have school debt they are unable to pay. Families would no longer have to navigate the school meal application process nor encounter barriers such as language access. Universal school meals would also alleviate the financial burden on schools who have to cover the costs of families unable to pay their school meal debt.

Including universal school meals in this year’s budget would level the playing field for all students (regardless of income) and would ensure all students have a nourishing meal. Funding universal school meals would also enhance students’ abilities to focus better, have higher academic achievements, and improvement in behavioral and physical health. Lastly, for every dollar invested in providing healthy meals for all students, New York gets at least two dollars back in health, economic, equity, and environmental benefits.³

¹Healthy School Meals for All: https://schoolmealsforallny.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/HMFSA-policy-proposal-1_5_23.pdf

² Health School Meals for All: https://schoolmealsforallny.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/HMFSA-policy-proposal-1_5_23.pdf

³ Healthy School Meals for All: https://schoolmealsforallny.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/HMFSA-policy-proposal-1_5_23.pdf

CCC therefore strongly urges state leaders to include universal school meals in the FY24 Enacted Budget. We also strongly support proposals in the Executive Budget that would allocate \$758,000 for farm to school initiatives to expand healthy local food for school children, as well as \$3 million for summer food program for the 2023-24 school year.

Community Schools

The community school model is one that takes a whole-student approach by addressing the needs of a child both at home and at school. When properly funded, community schools ensure schools can effectively partners with community-based service providers to offer wraparound services to students, families, and local community members, leading to improved student attendance, academic achievement, family engagement, improved child physical and mental health outcomes, and increased community safety.⁴

Given how impactful the community school model has proven to be, we were disappointed to see the Governor’s proposal to only maintain current funding for community schools and failure to increase investments. **CCC, in partnership with New York State Community Schools Network, urges New York State to make the following investments for community schools:**

- **Dedicate \$100 million to creating a Community Schools Categorical Grant to expand community schools statewide.** These funds would allow community schools to maximize resources and would increase the capacity of school districts to equitably meet the holistic needs of students.
- **Invest an additional \$1 million in community schools technical assistance centers.** This investment would help increase access to technical assistance for existing community schools, add at least one additional technical assistance center to expand capacity statewide, and strengthen support for new partners looking to establish new community schools.
- **Maintain the current Community Schools Set-Aside of \$250 million to ensure sustainability and continuous improvement of community schools.** This set-aside provides ongoing support for many community schools across the state so that they can continue to address the critical needs of students and their families.

Preschool Special Education

CCC was pleased to see language in the Executive Budget to provide \$2.5 million for the New York State Education Department (SED) to study and design a new rate-setting methodology for preschool and school-age special education providers in order to streamline and improve the timeliness of tuition rates. However, we are disappointed to see that the recommendations must

⁴ 2020. “What Is the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative?” *Rand Corporation*. Retrieved from: https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/RAND_RB10107.pdf

be cost neutral. Students in need of special education supports continue to be harmed by the lack of adequate seats and services, driven by inadequate rates. **We urge state leaders to ensure the enacted budget removes language requiring cost neutrality from the proposed methodology review to ensure that identified solutions actually address the core barriers to service access.**

Pre-Kindergarten

CCC believes that pre-K should be universal statewide. We were pleased to see the Governor's proposal to invest an additional \$125 million to further expand pre-K, which would result in an additional 17,500 seats statewide. However, we believe the State could go further and join other statewide partners in offering the following recommendations:

- **Increase rates for school districts that were early adopters of Universal Pre-K who continue to have programs funded by local tax revenue.** Currently, some school districts continue to receive only \$5,400 per child from the State for full day pre-K, an amount that is inadequate to cover the cost of quality programs. In addition, an investment from the State to increase rates would also work to ensure that pre-K teachers at community-based organizations are paid a thriving wage.
- **Ensure equitable distribution of pre-K funding to community-based organizations and family child care programs.** In order to ensure continuity of learning for children that honors family choice, modalities should be equitably funded across the pre-K spectrum.
- **Ensure that pre-K special education is adequately funded.** Too often when funding for early childhood education is increased, special education students excluded from the investments. Access to education is a right for all students, regardless of ability.

Behavioral Health Supports for Students

Schools remain one of the essential sources of behavioral health services for young people. Too often, schools lack the adequate resources or training to support the behavioral health needs of their students, and respond to mental health crises by engaging in harmful and punitive practices including suspensions, expulsions, or involvement of emergency medical services and the police. New York must invest significantly more in a continuum of mental and emotional supports for students throughout the state, ranging from universal and preventive interventions, to clinical care for students with more acute needs.

CCC supports the Executive Budget proposal to provide an additional \$10 million for school-based mental health clinics. School-based mental health clinics play a critical role in providing on-site clinical supports to students. However, we also believe the state can take additional steps to strengthen the efficacy of existing Article 31 School-Based Mental Health Clinics. Currently, SBMHCs bill Medicaid and insurance directly for services provided to students. However, Medicaid will not reimburse for the full array of services schools need,

including collaboration with school personnel, services for uninsured children, services for children without a diagnosis, and training and support for school staff and the school population more broadly. Unfortunately, many school clinics lack the State funding necessary to provide the types of wraparound supports that are so essential for ensuring a school-based mental health clinic is part of a continuum of whole-school supports for students. **New York State can address this challenge by providing additional wraparound funding to support existing SBMHCs so they can be more comprehensive, inclusive, and effective.**

CCC also supports the intent behind the Executive Budget proposal to require commercial insurers to reimburse covered services in SBMHCs at a negotiated rate, or an amount no less than the Medicaid rate. However, we are concerned that the ability to negotiate a rate will result in commercial insurers continuing to negotiate rates that are far below the cost of service, resulting in ongoing challenges operating Article 31 clinics and meeting the needs of students. **Instead, we urge the Governor and Legislature to negotiate a budget that requires that commercial insurers pay the Ambulatory Patient Group (APG) rate, both in and out of school settings.**

Finally, we feel the State must do more to support the needs of students at all levels, including by providing a full continuum of mental health supports in schools able to address the social-emotional needs of all students, as well as the clinical needs of students with more acute challenges. Critical approaches include:

- **Passing the Solutions Not Suspensions Act to improve school climate and limit the number of days a student can be suspended to a maximum of 20 days.** Each year, New York students lose hundreds of thousands of days of learning due to suspensions, which are shown to lead to negative academic outcomes and higher rates of dropout.⁵ CCC is a strong supporter of the Solutions Not Suspensions bill, which would limit the use of suspensions in grades K-3, shorten the maximum length of suspensions from 180 days to 20 days, and require codes of conduct to implement restorative justice practices. We strongly urge State leaders to pass Solutions Not Suspensions into law this legislative session.
- **Significantly expanding the availability of restorative practices, crisis intervention training, family peer advocates, and programs that positively engage students who are struggling.**
- **Ensuring that all educators receive trauma-informed mental health training.**
- **Providing oversight of the state's spending on mental health in schools.** Communities and educators must have access to information on how school funding – including recent funding from the Recover from COVID Schools Program (RECOVS) Learning and Mental Health Grants and other federal funding – is being spent to support students with the greatest need.

Thank you for your consideration and for your support of students throughout New York State.