

Testimony of UJA-Federation of New York

**The Joint Fiscal Committees of the New York State Legislature
Elementary and Secondary Education Hearing for Fiscal Year 2023-2024**

**Submitted by:
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On behalf of UJA-Federation of New York, our network of nonprofit partners and those we serve, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the importance of maintaining and expanding support for education in New York State.

Established more than 100 years ago, UJA-Federation of New York is one of the nation's largest local philanthropies. Central to UJA's mission is to care for those in need—identifying and meeting the needs of New Yorkers of all backgrounds and Jews everywhere. UJA has more than 50,000 engaged donors in the New York area, supports an expansive network of nearly 100 nonprofit organizations serving those that are most vulnerable and in need of programs and services, and allocates over \$150 million each year to strengthen Jewish life, combat poverty and food insecurity, nurture mental health and well-being and respond to crises here and across the globe.

Pre-Kindergarten

UJA's non-profit partners provide Pre-K programs to young children across New York City, Westchester and Long Island. All of UJA's non-profit partners that offer Pre-K services provide a wide range of programs and resources to their communities. These programs offer extended hours and year-round care for children, which parents and/or guardians relied on to continue to work to provide for their families during the pandemic. Providers are extremely knowledgeable of the specific needs of the communities they serve and offer instruction in languages other than English when needed. UJA's non-profit partners in New York City are able to provide this service partially due to funding that the state contributes to support the Universal Pre-K for All initiative. UJA appreciates the continued investment provided in the FY 24 Executive Budget for the Universal Pre-K program in New York City.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted educational inequalities across New York State. In many cases, families who could afford additional assistance or tutoring for their children could address these barriers, while others, who could not, struggled to provide the supports their children needed to benefit from virtual, sporadic in-person learning or any educational opportunities in the case of fee for service Pre-K programs. Access to free, high-quality Pre-K is one of the most effective educational strategies for addressing this inequality, it is also one of the best ways to

ensure that parents and guardians can be part of the workforce-one of the main components of ensuring New York State remains on the path to economic recovery.

In recent years, the state has continued to invest in Pre-K programs outside of New York City increasing the number of four-year olds accessing free, state funded programs. Unfortunately, there are still not enough state funded Pre-K seats for every four year old who requires one in New York State. **UJA supports the \$125 million investment included in the FY24 Executive Budget but encourages a total of \$250 million be included in the enacted budget to accelerate Pre-K expansion, ensure providers are being compensated at the true cost of overseeing the program and make this program universally accessible throughout the state.**

Three agencies in UJA's network of nonprofits receive funding to oversee state funded Pre-K programs. Each of these providers had private pay Pre-K programs before the expansion of state funded Pre-K in their school districts. They have and continue to provide high-quality education to the children who are enrolled in their programs despite being underfunded to do so. In Long Island for example, programs receive \$5,400 per child from the state for a ten month Pre-K program. Before participating in state funded Pre-K, providers in the UJA network charged upward of \$12,000 per child for a 10 month Pre-K program. At the \$5,400 rate, agencies are operating at a loss with one saying they have to invest between \$55,000 and \$75,000 to make ends meet. Lower rates also impact what programs pay teachers and assistant teachers. Due to the low rates they receive, one agency in Long Island pays lead teachers in their Pre-K program between \$33,000 and \$35,000 a year while an individual with similar credentials gets paid upward of \$65,000 in New York City. Long Island Pre-K programs are prone to losing staff to programs either in New York City or to local school districts who are able to compensate their employees at higher rates. It is becoming increasingly financially challenging for these programs to remain open.

The nonprofits in UJA's network recognize the positive impact high-quality early childhood education has on young children's development and are committed to providing this service to the communities they serve. But they must be compensated for the true cost of overseeing these programs so they can continue to meet the needs of the students in their programs and compensate staff at a wage that is commensurate with their training and experience. Currently programs cannot negotiate the per participant rates they receive for state funded Pre-K programs. UJA encourages NYSED to work with local school districts and community based organizations to negotiate higher rates for state funded Pre-K programs in community based organizations.

Preschool Special Education Programs

The FY23 enacted budget included an 11% rate increase for 4410 preschools (special education preschools for children with disabilities). This was a much needed investment for a sector that had been underfunded resulting in underpaid staff, programs closing and children with disabilities not being able to access a specialized educational program they are legally entitled to. Sustained investments in these programs are needed now. **UJA is supportive of the \$2.5 million included in the Executive Budget to develop a tuition rate-setting methodology to support the long-term stability of preschool special education programs.** The rate-setting methodology should allow for stakeholder input and should not require the recommendations made during the process to be cost neutral.

Nonpublic School Funding

UJA is grateful to Governor Hochul and the legislature for the multiple programs and funding streams provided to the benefit of students in nonpublic schools. We know and appreciate the hardships faced by teachers, staff, and parents in all schools, especially the past few years. Both the public and nonpublic school communities have been working diligently to keep our children and teachers safe, while at the same time providing our children with a quality education. Even though 13% of children in New York State attend a nonpublic school, less than 1% of state education spending is devoted to these children. Continued and expanded state support of the students in nonpublic schools will benefit virtually every community across the state. UJA appreciates the proposed funding included in the FY 24 Executive Budget and the Governor's recognition of the role over 1,600 nonpublic schools play in educating approximately 400,000 children in New York State.

Health, Safety, & Security for Nonpublic Schools

Over the years, UJA appreciates that the State has expanded the eligible uses of Nonpublic School Safety Equipment Grant Program (NPSE) funding so schools can maximize its impact. In 2016 the program was expanded to cover health equipment and security personnel, and in 2022 to include health- and safety-related capital projects. UJA is grateful that that the Executive Budget maintains level funding of \$45 million for the Nonpublic School Safety Equipment Grant Program (NPSE) program. **UJA urges the legislature to include \$45 million for the NPSE program into the enacted budget and continue safeguarding all students and their health.**

STEM Funding for Nonpublic Schools

UJA appreciates Governor Hochul recommending an increase in funding from \$58 million to \$70 million to support Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math education in nonpublic schools. While this initiative has bolstered nonpublic schools' ability to offer rigorous STEM programs to better prepare students for competitive careers, the demand for and rapid changes in STEM instruction is outpacing the state's support of the program. UJA asks that funding for the STEM reimbursement program increase this year. The importance of the STEM reimbursement program is evidenced by how many nonpublic schools have applied. By August 1, 2018, the state had received 1,800 applications totaling \$81 million, far beyond the current appropriation. **UJA urges increased support for the program toward \$90 million to meet current demand, and expand, beyond STEM, the secular subjects for which reimbursement is eligible.**

EANS funding to GEERS

The second and third stimulus packages included Covid relief funding for nonpublic schools. Due to heavy restrictions including the limited time for procurement process placed on accessing the funds, much of the funding was and remains inaccessible by the schools. UJA is grateful that the Executive Budget authorizes any unobligated federal Emergency Assistance to Nonpublic Schools' funds to be used to support nonpublic schools for allowable pandemic-related costs through the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund.

MSR/CAP

UJA appreciates that that the Executive Budget maintains level funding of \$193.13 million available for Mandated Service Reimbursement (MSR) and the Comprehensive Attendance Policy (CAP). NYSED has requested increased funding in MSR/CAP to \$210,468,000 to align with claims for the 2022-23 year. **UJA urges the legislature to increase the support to \$210,468,000 million for MSR/CAP in the enacted budget.**

Free school lunch for all

Providing free meals for all students—regardless of income—is a proven strategy to reduce food insecurity, support learning, improve mental and physical health, and bolster educational and economic equity. Students experiencing hunger struggle to focus and engage, have lower school attendance than their peers and are at a greater risk of mental and physical health problems. School meals are one of the farthest-reaching anti-hunger programs for school aged children, but only providing free meals to some children leaves many children behind. At the start of this school year, more than 726,000 students in nearly 2,000 schools across the state lost access to free school meals. New York State must establish and fund a permanent, statewide Healthy School Meals for All program to ensure all students have the healthy food they need to learn and thrive.

Adult Literacy Education (ALE)

ALE funds English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Adult Basic Education (ABE) and High School Equivalency (HSE) preparation classes and is one of the few state funding streams able to address the needs of lower-level learners. In New York State, there are 3.9 million individuals who lack their high school diploma, English language proficiency, or both.

UJA was disappointed to see that the Executive Budget cut ALE funding by \$1.5 million, meaning that over 1000 students in current programs will no longer have access to those programs. UJA urges the Governor to restore funding to FY23 levels at \$9.3 million so that programs can remain whole. UJA also respectfully requests support for the investment of an additional \$9.3 million in ALE programs for a newly proposed ALE Stabilization and Enhancement Fund to begin to stabilize and enhance ALE programs. This supplemental funding stream would be allocated to all programs currently receiving ALE funding, effectively doubling the funding for each contract. Increased investment in per-student funding in Adult Literacy Education, when strategically invested by programs in resources, services, and supports, will lead to greater outcomes and a wider range of impacts for adult literacy students, their families, and their communities, and allow programs to better serve the 6,000 New Yorkers currently enrolled. Proposed uses of this funding include: upgrading the program's own technology, internet, and digital access; upgrading the program's classroom facilities and infrastructure; increasing the number of full-time staff and teaching positions and increasing the pay, benefits, and working conditions of teachers to achieve greater parity with K-12, and to cultivate a strong, stable adult education workforce.

Lastly, UJA requests an additional \$9.3 million to reach and serve 3,300 more students at an increased rate per student. With this new \$18.6 million investment, the FY24 funding ask addresses two priorities: 1) sustain and stabilize programs to serve current adult literacy students

through the ALE Stabilization and Enhancement Fund, and 2) expand services to reach more students, including new arrivals.

Limited skills make it difficult for individuals to support their children in school, access health care, secure and maintain living-wage jobs, advocate for their rights as workers, and fully participate in the political process. The majority of adults in NYS with limited literacy skills are women and people of color; a majority are immigrants, including many who are undocumented; others are BIPOC who were born and raised in the US but do not have a high school level education. Many of these adults are currently on the frontlines of the pandemic, performing essential work that is sustaining our communities.

Adult literacy education is the key to economic security and social mobility. Median wages for adults with a high school diploma or its equivalent are 24% greater than for those without a diploma. Furthermore, higher levels of literacy are associated with greater health knowledge, more efficient use of healthcare services, and the ability to manage chronic health conditions and communicate with healthcare providers.

Restoration of the \$1.5 million combined with an investment of \$18.6 million in the ALE Stabilization and Enhancement Fund and seats for additional students would allow providers to better serve the over 5,600 New Yorkers enrolled in state funded ALE programs and UJA requests the legislature's support.

Conclusion

UJA-Federation of New York respectfully urges your consideration and support of these vital programs that assist our state's most vulnerable and neediest individuals and the organizations that serve them. Thank you for your consideration. Please contact Faith Behum behumf@ujafedny.org or 212-836-1338 with any questions.