

Testimony of

***New York State Congress of Parents & Teachers
(NYS Parent Teacher Association)***

By

Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky, Esq.

Executive Director

NYS Education Budget

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I am Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky, the Executive Director of the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. (NYS PTA), and am proud to represent our 210,000 members of NYS PTA and the parents and families of our 2.6 million public school children. It is our mission to make every child's potential a reality and support EVERY child with ONE voice.

On behalf of our President Helen Hoffman and our members, NYS PTA appreciates the opportunity to comment on how the Executive Budget impacts children and families statewide.

Thank you to Assembly and Senate Finance Chairs, Education Chairs, committee members, and members of the legislature for your continued commitment to ALL children, their families, and our schools.

We continue to watch in awe during these difficult past years, as dedicated, outstanding educators, school-related professionals, and staff members do ALL we can to serve ALL children. Public education is our nation's greatest hope. It is the promise that all children - regardless of race, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, learning abilities or disabilities, spoken word - have a right to a free, appropriate, high-quality education, one that will meet their diverse needs and support them in our 21st century global economy.

It is public school that gives every child an equal chance to grow into a successful and flourishing member of society. A public education lays the foundation for a lifetime of opportunity and accomplishment.

Yet while our children try to learn, and our educators try to teach, they struggle every day.

Struggles with increasing school-based food insecurity, poverty and income insecurity of children and families, heightened and increased need for mental health support and services for students and staff, the shifting priorities in a school building, and continued the fears of illness.

Parents and families are still facing struggles in their daily lives - far longer than we could have ever imagined. They have dealt with unemployment, underemployment, home-based food insecurity, trauma, sickness, and mental health concerns for our children and for ourselves. They are juggling work, family, childcare, and health concerns. At the same time, they try to figure out how to get free or low-cost Wi-Fi for learning, how to keep our children fed with healthy meals, and how to keep the lights and heat on, while searching for employment.

We cannot do this alone, and on their behalf, we truly thank the members of the legislature and Governor Hochul - as we know we have partners in you.

School Aid

The Executive Budget provides \$34.5 billion in total School Aid for FY 2024. This represents a year-to-year increase of \$3.1 billion (10%) to school aid, including a \$2.7 billion Foundation Aid increase. It also ensures each school district receives a minimum year-to-year Foundation Aid increase of 3%.

NYS PTA strongly supports this proposal. This is a major victory for children, a significant amount of school aid, and in line with the NYS PTA and NYS Educational Conference Board

school aid request, which can be found here: <https://nyspta.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ECB-Paper-FINAL-1-9-23.pdf>

While we support finding for academic recovery, including tutoring, we do NOT support foundation aid set asides.

Fully funding Foundation Aid will greatly and positively impact the lives of our 2.6 million school children. The greatest of thanks must go to the Legislature for their continued commitment to our children, and to Governor Hochul for her partnership.

Now that Foundation Aid will be fully funded in this FY State Budget, it is important to have conversations on what a meaningful and adequate school aid formula is, how we can best leverage state and tax dollars to support children, and what changes we may need to see that every child – no matter their zip code – receives the highest quality education that NY can afford them.

Together with the Educational Conference Board, we recommend that the State Education Department lead a full review of Foundation Aid formula in coordination with lawmakers and stakeholders. The Foundation Aid Formula requires significant updates to reflect the current cost of educating students, changing community demographics, and levels of student need.

Expense-Based Aids

The Executive Budget includes full funding of expense-based aid, such as school construction, pupil transportation, BOCES services, and the educational costs of certain students with disabilities. The running of the statutory formula is projected to increase expense-based aids by \$232 million.

NYS PTA strongly supports this proposal.

Pre-K and Child Care Funding: An Opportunity

The Executive Budget includes an additional \$125 million to add 17,500 seats for full-day pre-K 4 year-old programs.

While NYS PTA strongly supports this proposal, we look to the legislature for meaningful increases in funding for high-quality school-based pre-K programs.

All children should have complete and equal access to high-quality pre- school and kindergarten educational opportunities. Parents and families play an integral role in pre-school, and high-quality programs must include attention to the unique developmental nature of the social/emotional, physical and academic experience of young children in a manner that addresses the whole child.

NYS PTA also supports the new tax credit for the creation and expansion of child care, and the expansion of access to child care assistance by raising the income limit to the maximum allowable by federal law.

The pandemic has shown us that high-quality and affordable childcare for parents and families is not a luxury, but a must for our workforce, and a must for our birth to 3 children. By focusing on increased support for our earliest learners, we will support both their families, and our children's life long journey.

Early High School, PTECH and Community schools

We appreciate that the proposal continues funding for after-school programming, early college high schools, P-TECH programs, community schools - which are all priorities of NYS PTA.

We support the \$20 million in grant funding for new ECHS and P-TECH programs, prioritizing support for students in high-need school districts, with programs focused on computer science and computer and software engineering. However, we prefer funding to be non-grant based, and sufficient to support all school districts on a formula basis.

We also support the \$10 million (over two years) in competitive funding for school districts, BOCES, and community colleges to develop strategic workforce plans – however we prefer non-competitive funding.

We continue to seek increases in all of these critical programs that truly support our children. Early-college high schools and P-TECH programs lead to greater graduation rates and successes in college and career.

We continue to seek new and expanded funding for Community Schools, as they continue to be an effective strategy for student and family success, and often address the health, social, and socio-emotional needs of students and their families.

Support for Special Schools

NYS PTA supports the \$2.5 million for the State Education Department to study and design a new rate-setting methodology for certain special education schools.

We further support the \$8 million for capital improvements for State Schools for the Deaf

School Meals for ALL - critical and necessary program and MUST be state funded

On September 7, 2022, when our NYS students went back to school, 726,000 children lost their access to free breakfast and lunch. 726,000 children.

No parent, no family, no educator, no one wants to see a child hungry. But that is what is happening. Our children are hungry, they are food insecure. For some, school is the only place they receive a warm or healthy meal. Congress has failed to act, so now New York State must.

Sadly, on February 1 when the Executive Budget was released, School Meals for ALL wasn't included.

1 in 7 kids in New York experience hunger, disproportionately impacting Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and urban and rural children.

Hungry kids can't learn. Students experiencing hunger struggle to focus, have lower attendance than their peers, and are at greater risk of mental and physical health problems.

A family of four making just \$51,400 is over-income for free school meals. As a result, in NYS 470,000 children are ineligible for free school meals, but live in households earning less than a living wage.

Why school meals for all? When students perceive school meals as only for children from low-income households, many decline to participate, despite their hunger. Participation drops as students get older and more aware of the stigma. Stigma, literacy and language barriers, and administrative burdens keep many eligible families from submitting school meal applications, driving unpaid school meal debt—an estimated \$24.9 million statewide.

We must provide breakfast & lunch at no cost for all students each school day, regardless of household income. Healthy School Meals for ALL:

- Levels the playing field for kids and families
- Reduces hunger - households with children attending community eligible schools are three times less likely to experience food insecurity
- Eliminates stigma and reduces bullying
- Provides families financial relief - receiving school breakfast and lunch at no cost saves families an estimated \$140 per child in grocery spending each month
- Eliminates school meal debt, a significant burden for families and school district budgets

We cannot let our children, and their need for these critical food nutrition programs down.

You can read more here on this critical issue in detail: https://nyspta.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/HMFSA-policy-proposal-9_15_22-1.pdf

School-based Mental Health Programs

The Executive Budget includes \$10 million for expansion of school-based mental health services.

This figure is woefully short of what school districts need to support students, and we need your help to dramatically expand services in our schools.

In a recent Fall survey of NYS PTA members, respondents were asked which youth mental health issues were most important facing our students today. The results showed alarming trends (top results listed, respondents could offer more than one concern):

- Anxiety - 81.7% of respondents felt anxiety was the most important mental health issue facing our students today
- Depression - 74.5%
- Bullying – 62.6%
- Suicide or Suicidal Thoughts/Ideation – 54.4%
- Cyberbullying – 50.3%
- Substance Use – 35.7%

- Youth Violence – 34%
- Other issues listed facing students included (in no particular order): abuse, domestic violence, body image and shaming, eating disorders, self-esteem, social acceptance, gender identity and expression, LGBTQ+ acceptance, divorce and family separation, screen time, digital addiction, anger, gun violence, loneliness, post-pandemic coping, peer pressure, academic pressure, academic recovery, testing pressure

In positive news, 90.5% of respondents indicated that have conversations with their children about mental health.

However, 55.7% of parents and families asked for more help in having these difficult conversations with their children.

When asked which mental health information and/or resources parents and families have accessed through their child’s school district, most common resources identified included: school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, webinars, guest speakers, newsletters, and social emotional programs.

To address this crisis, NYS PTA will be empaneling a new NYS PTA Mental Health Task Force, led by NYS PTA Past President Dana Platin. This task force will be charged to expand existing NYS PTA mental health programs, identify new ways to support youth mental health, and increase community and school partnerships.

We are also pleased that NYS PTA Executive Director Kyle Belokopitsky was just appointed to serve on Mental Health Association in NYS’s newly formed School Mental Health Advisory Committee.

When reviewing survey data, we found that concerns of parents and families were spread across all NYS counties, in all 12 NYS PTA regions, in all school-age categories, and in all racial and ethnicity cohorts.

Know that NYS PTA stands ready to address and expand support for youth mental health.

Community-based Mental Health Support

NYS PTA supports many of the expansions to mental health services, including:

- Increase in residential mental health beds (\$890 million)
- Funding for 12 new Comprehensive Emergency Psychiatric Programs (\$60 million in capital)
- Requiring insurance companies to cover mental health services
- Continued expansion of the 988 Crisis Line
- Community based youth mental health support including \$10 million in grants to suicide prevention programs targeting high-risk youth, \$12 million for the Healthy Steps program and Home-based Crisis Intervention (HBCI) teams, and \$5 million for High Fidelity wrap-around supports
- Increased funding and support for Opioid prevention, addiction and recovery services

NYS PTA continues to support expansion of programs to assist youth and families in mental health crisis.

We also support the \$16 million for renovations to OCFS youth facilities.

Teacher Support Initiatives

The Executive Budget includes a number of teacher support initiatives.

NYS PTA strongly supports these initiatives, and further support for our fantastic and dedicated educators. Supporting in-service and pre-service education students has never been more important. We also continue to support funding increases for the Al Shanker Program, the Master Teacher Program, and other Teacher Excellence programs.

Charter Schools

The Executive Budget increases NYC charter schools' per-pupil funding by 4.5%.

NYS PTA continues to be seriously concerned with the diversion of funds away from traditional public schools, and with many troubling operations of charter schools and charter school management companies. However, we support individual parent choice.

We are strongly opposed, however, to the elimination of the regional cap on the number of charters that may be issued in New York City. Additionally, the Executive Budget proposes to permanently authorize the reissuance of any charter originally issued to a charter school that subsequently closed after July 1, 2015, due to surrender, revocation, termination or non-renewal.

NYS PTA strongly opposed both of these proposals. They will have a serious negative effect on our students, and have a disproportionate negative effect on our students in NYC and the NYC school system.

We continue to fully support our State Education Department having final approval authority over the charter approval process for ALL NYS charter school applications. Charters must have greater accountability, and SED oversight of the approval process will greatly benefit our students who attend them.

Nonpublic Schools

The Executive Budget includes \$193 million for nonpublic schools for mandated aid, and \$70 million for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) instruction, and \$45 million for capital health and safety projects, including critical repair and maintenance of nonpublic schools' facilities.

Zero-Emission School Buses

The Executive Budget includes a new reporting requirement on the implementation of the zero-emission bus mandate, however NYS schools are still awaiting the state's roadmap for this transition.

We continue to be concerned about the timeline for transition to zero emission school buses. We are also concerned about fire hazards of lithium ion batteries used in zero emission school buses, as they are proving to be a serious firefighting hazard.

Native American Reservation Schools

The Executive Budget provides \$20.1 million for capital improvements to the three State-owned schools on Native American reservations. This funding will modernize classrooms and HVAC systems, among other school facility upgrades. NYS PTA supports this funding.

Investments in SUNY and CUNY

The Executive Budget includes a number of increases in funding to support the SUNY and CUNY systems. NYS PTA supports these investments in our public higher education system.

Other Initiatives

Maternal Health

NYS PTA supports all expansions to programs and services for maternal and infant health.

Environmental

The Executive Budget includes:

- \$38.8 million for lead inspection requirements in rental properties
- PFAS Clean Up Forever Chemicals Initiative
- \$10 million for small and underserved communities for PFAS testing

NYS PTA supports these proposals.

Crimes against children

NYS PTA supports the increased funding for the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Unit

Broadband Investments and ConnectALL Initiative

The Executive Budget includes \$1.6 billion for the ConnectALL Initiative, which NYS PTA continues to support.

We fully support free access to broadband for all low-income, high-need NYS families, and continued tech and digital equity initiatives.

The pandemic truly brought tech and digital equity issues to light. We continue to be concerned with the lack of broadband access in many communities, and lack of devices to support students, as meaningful access to high-quality, free or low-cost broadband is critical for all students.

It is likely some form of remote learning continues for the foreseeable future. We must do better in supporting our students and families to meet the technology demands of 21st century learning. We also fully support Senator Mayer's E-Learn proposal, and look forward to its passage and enactment.

In Conclusion

Every parent and family have a dream for their children. It is our job to be dream makers, ensuring every child, no matter their zip code, no matter their ethnicity, no matter their ability, no matter their gender identity, no matter their race, has the highest quality 21st century education to lead them to success in college, career or life.

We humbly ask that you continue to advocate for infusing our schools with the tools and resources necessary to accelerate the success of our children and families. Together, we can Support Children and Raise Awareness, and make every child's potential a reality. No other work is more important.