

School Administrators Association of New York State

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Testimony of the

School Administrators Association of New York State

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Elementary and Secondary Education

Executive Budget Proposal

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Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Weinstein, Chairperson Mayer, Chairperson Benedetto, honorable members of the legislature and distinguished staff, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on funding for elementary and secondary education contained in the executive budget for FY 2025.

My name is Cynthia Gallagher and I serve as the director of government relations for the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS). SAANYS represents building administrators and program directors from the Big 5 cities and the majority of districts in the rest of the state. Our membership has grown to over 14,000 active and 8,000 retired building administrators and program directors across New York State.

SAANYS is appreciative of the support given to building administrators and their schools. Last year's final budget provided expanded opportunities to address the dramatic shifts in needs of our students and school communities. We know that you have heard their concerns and challenges and hope such support will continue this year as our members continue to raise serious concerns for our youth and educators.

During the summer months, when our members planned for the new school year, there was anticipation that instructional programs would continue to be strengthened and the additional services gained through the full phase-in of foundation aid would be maintained. Many of our districts made use of the new funding to add mental health services to their schools. Principals were encouraged when discussions occurred to revise the Annual Professional Performance Plan (APPR) and when student discipline was discussed at public hearings. It was a better year for the educational community and educators were hopeful that this was the beginning of continued progress to address the complex educational challenges.

However, this optimism has dissipated as student migration strained many districts across the state and it became almost impossible to fully staff schools with critical positions. Increasing disappointment has set in as the promise of a fully phased in foundation formula appears to be threatened. School administrators are now faced with a proposed budget that does not address numerous priority areas and which decreases resources needed to stabilize school districts.

School Administrators' Priorities

In 2021, as schools continued to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, SAANYS surveyed members to obtain a profile of their most critical needs and priorities. At that time only 28 percent of respondents thought that there were significant learning losses. The underlying belief was that such losses were a temporary phenomenon due to the pandemic. School administrators had a strong sense that students were struggling with many other challenges beyond academics and reported significant increases in student social-emotional needs and behaviors. In the 2021 survey, over 98 percent of respondents reported increases in student

behavioral issues. The second most challenging area was staffing shortages of teachers and substitutes.

Early this fall, SAANYS conducted a follow-up survey to examine current priorities and needs to compare results to the former 2021 survey.

Over 52 percent of survey respondents reported that staffing vacancies are their highest priority, followed by 51 percent indicating that student absenteeism and learning loss are their most challenging areas. Over 65 percent of respondents indicate that substitutes/teachers are the most difficult to fill.

When asked if increases in the foundation aid impacted their schools, over 63 percent report a positive response and indicated that the most commonly expanded areas are expanded numbers of instructional and support staff, and expansion of core instructional programs.

These surveys tell a story—challenges that emerged during the pandemic are becoming obdurate. Our early childhood educators are raising warning flags that the delayed developmental stages in young students, initially thought to be temporary due to pandemic disruptions, are giving way to substantial learning losses which need intensive remediations. The student behavioral challenges at the middle and high school levels reported during the pandemic have given rise to chronic absenteeism along with decreased networks to provide needed support. This is not the time to back away from long-promised funding to support schools to the level that they urgently need.

State Aid for Education

Foundation Aid

The strong support for education and mental health in the FY 2024 final state budget was heralded by educators and provided hope that we could begin to reinforce eroding education and health structures.

SAANYS believed that last year's final state budget demonstrated a re-commitment to strengthening fundamental needs. Schools began to add needed student support services, staff, and expanded instructional programs to address long-term learning loss.

SAANYS believed that the governor understood the serious and critical needs of schools and educators across the state. We assumed that educators had been heard and that New York would stand firm in its understanding that addressing the needs of students was critical in supporting families and communities.

SAANYYS trusted that the foundation aid formula used to generate the full phase-in would be used in consecutive years and did not think that this was a one and done occurrence, nor did we believe that the first year of full phase-in would be its last.

SAANYYS understandably expected there would be good faith endeavors to examine the foundation aid formula in a coordinated and participatory manner with representation by stakeholders with the requisite knowledge and experience to understand the real-life impact of any changes. We understood that some components needed to be reexamined considering outdated data and shifts in educational needs. We did not expect the governor to circumvent this considered process only to produce unilateral changes.

However, those beliefs and hopes have been diminished. What has emerged from the proposed executive budget is the demonstration of transactional support, rather than a solid year-to-year commitment to schools. We have heard many of the same explanations used in the past that allude to schools having more than enough funding. We have recently heard comments that the education budget comprises one of the largest portions of the state budget and should be a target for proposed cuts. What is not heard is a clear commitment that education is core to the prosperity of the state. We have not heard an understanding of how many additional roles that schools have taken on, or how schools are forced to do more. The proposed decreases in foundation aid and the manipulation of the formula once again undermines the confidence of school districts that had hoped they would be supported in their work.

Although the governor's proposed budget promotes a 2.4 percent increase in state aid and \$507 million increase in foundation aid, this representation is far less than what was anticipated and heralded with the solid promise of a full phase in of foundation aid. In actuality, the increase is approximately 2.1 percent, as the governor proposed state aid calculations that included increases in prekindergarten funding by operating a federally funded prekindergarten program. There will not be an expansion of programs or student seats. The full use of the foundation aid formula as used last year, would have generated \$925 million over the, levels.

The proposed processes used to decrease aid to schools lack the nuances necessary to generate district allocations that make sense. Instead, the anticipated rate of inflation was manipulated. Current law would use a rate of 4.1 percent and instead the proposed budget uses 2.4 percent. The lower rate of inflation was created by using a ten-year average resulting in a much lower rate.

Also, the proposed budget would eliminate the long-held practice of ensuring that school districts receive at least as much operating aid in the current year as they did in the prior year – "save harmless." This results in a 50% reduction of funding for over half of the districts identified as save harmless. It should also be noted that the number of districts identified as save harmless has increased by 7.8%.

The combined injurious impact of the above foundation formula manipulations produces baffling changes in aid for many. For example, there are some small rural districts that will see negative 10% change in aid while a neighboring district of similar characteristics loses less than one percent. In counties such as Suffolk, 37 out of 73 school districts had changes of aid from less than 1 percent to -29 percent.

There was no foreshadowing or anticipation of such decreases. What has occurred instead is what was less than a year of solid fiscal gains, districts are once again faced with a process that was not transparent or predictable. What has occurred is needless manipulation of statutory formula factors that resulted in minimal savings. The approach should have been a systemic reexamination of the formula with a gradual introduction of modifications that begin to smooth-out funding practices.

Continued Use of Set Asides

SAANYS has long called for discontinuing carve outs from foundation aid. It is unreasonable to provide an increase to foundation aid and then stipulate that a certain amount must be set aside for use on a specific program. SAANYS supports community schools, which have been highly successful in many of our members' districts, but such funding should be a specific and separate allocation; not subtracted from a district's foundation aid. How foundation aid is utilized should continue to be based on decisions by the local school district, and not constrained by required set-asides.

Expense-based Aid

SAANYS is pleased to see that expense-based aids are proposed to be fully funded. This is a welcome departure from prior budgets when expense-based aids were underfunded. We support the strategy to reimburse districts for their transportation, BOCES, building, public high-cost excess cost and private excess cost, and special services aids.

Mental Health and Schools

The inextricable linkages between education and mental health are critical to the wellbeing of our students. No child can learn without food, nor without their basic social-emotional needs being met. School administrators across the state have indicated that the mental health of students is one of their highest priorities. The executive budget provides \$20 million for school-based health centers and stated in the governor's budget presentation that any school interested in establishing a school-based mental health services program will be able to do so. With limited community resources, the ability of districts to establish these school-based mental health clinics is welcomed.

School administrators understand the need for such services to be centrally located within school buildings. It is the hope of our school administrators that the additional support for mental health programs will add alternatives and approaches to address student discipline and behaviors. SAANYS is optimistic that the anticipated mental health school clinics will begin to support schools in a way that is greatly needed.

Additionally, the executive budget proposes increased funding for grants that support mental health in community schools. The proposed budget provides \$10 million for other student health grants to support school districts and continued funding for the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center.

Back to Basics Reading

The governor has proposed a set of strategies to encourage refocusing reading instruction to align with the science of reading research. School districts will be required to certify that their curriculum, instructional practices, and professional development, align with guidance on best practice developed by the New York State Education Department. The governor allocated \$10 million directed to NYSUT to train teachers on the science of reading. SAANYS supports such funding for teachers but would strongly encourage additional funding to provide support for building administrators and program directors. Shifting instructional practice is a time and resource intensive endeavor. It is not accomplished by only training one-grade level at a time or two grade-levels at a time. It must be an intentional and scaffolded plan that builds upon new knowledge acquisition and embedded instruction. School-based initiatives must have the strong leadership of building administrators to ensure consistent and sustained implementation.

FAFSA Completion

The executive budget would require every school district to document that each high school senior or their parent/guardian attest that they have completed either the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the Jose Peralta NYS DREAM ACT application or that they decided not to apply. Districts are required to give seniors information on applying at least four times a year and to report data on numbers of students who did or did not submit.

Although SAANYS understands the intent of this proposal, we must underscore the addition of yet another unfunded mandate. In a working environment where building administrators have already taken on numerous additional responsibilities in the wake of the pandemic, the proposed requirement would add significantly to work staff workloads and additional staff and translators would be needed. Massive amounts of information would need to be disseminated. Additionally, information regarding the extent of this proposal has not been fully developed. There are many unknowns, such as issues related to student/family privacy. Section 2-d of Education Law is very extensive in its regulation and protection of student data. Further examination of how Section 2-d constrains a school district's ability to carry out the proposed

FAFSA completion support will be needed. Further clarity will also be needed as to the extent of required assistance and support throughout the application, coordination with institutes of higher education, or required collaboration/communication with families. Such a process would be very time-consuming and resource intensive for potentially minimal feedback from the community. A central question is why the application process has been made so complicated and cumbersome. The solution is not to add to overly taxed school administrators, but to streamline and correct the process itself.

School Meals

SAANYS was an active supporter of increased funding to ensure that all students in schools could have free breakfast and lunch in schools. Although the final budget did not reach universal coverage, substantial gains were made. The governor's proposed budget would provide a \$10 million increase to reimburse school lunches from \$0.06 to \$0.25. Funding would also be added for reduced priced meals, summer food programs, and reimbursement for school breakfast sponsors. SAANYS continues to support funding for breakfast and lunch meals for all students and that the legislature should build on last year's gains toward this goal.

Prekindergarten

There continues to be a need to streamline funding for prekindergarten programs and integrate such programs into the state aid program. This large initiative can no longer be implemented through a grant process and needs to be considered an integral part of the education system of New York. The executive budget proposes to eliminate the "supplement", not "supplant" requirement which would provide increased flexibility to schools accessing such funding. SAANYS strongly supports the need to provide one funding stream for all four year olds which would eliminate prior funding inconsistencies and hurdles.

Specific Funding for City Schools

Continued funding for specific programs to the Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, and Yonkers school districts has been allocated for many years and should continue. SAANYS is pleased to see continued funding for health based school services, Say Yes programs and funding for mentoring and tutoring as they are important components to support students.

After-School/Extended Day Programs

Another pillar of school safety is creating schools that meet the after school needs of students. The executive proposal would provide \$24 million for extended-day programs, and \$22 million for after-school programs. In combination with initiatives to enhance school safety and the

provision of placements for after-school tutoring, such efforts to support communities and provide safe havens for students continue.

Concerns Regarding the Executive Budget

The executive budget has not addressed a number of high priority areas for school administrators, nor provided an overall direction for education in New York. The executive budget enumerated several priority areas, however a broad context for direction or goals was not evident.

The following areas need comprehensive examination and are important to building administrators:

Attendance

Increased chronic absenteeism is a high priority for our administrators. The pandemic certainly disrupted routines and created many situations for some students that minimized the importance of schooling compared to personal trauma and economic hardships. School administrators have very few levers to address chronic absentees. PINS petitions are not effective as these programs have been decimated, community programs for youth have decreased, and attendance is a low priority for community enforcement. A comprehensive effort to address these challenges is needed.

Staffing Shortages

The executive budget does not address the critical need to increase the number of persons entering education fields. The NYS Department of Labor reports that teaching positions are the most difficult to fill across all industries. Initiatives to address Tier VI, provide resources to schools to increase salary levels, create improved pipelines and to ensure that our schools are positive learning environments.

Update Foundation Aid Formula

The full phase-in of foundation aid and increased state aid funding was welcomed and appreciated. Moving forward, SAANYS encourages the legislature to examine updating the foundation aid formula that was first developed in 2007. The cost of a sound basic education, (a key variable in the formula), use of current census data and levels of student need would benefit from review. This process should be undertaken by the New York State Education Department with considerable stakeholder input and with the goal of making legislative recommendations. Until this comprehensive examination of the formula occurs, the foundation aid formula should not be manipulated or revised to fully realize the gains of FY 2024.

Support for Building Administrators

Funding is needed for targeted and specific professional development for building administrators. As stated previously, the challenges of building-level administrators are complex. An example of the complex nature of their work is the coordination and communication needed between mental health programs, local law enforcement, and social services, while responding to critical and urgent daily crises. This requires extensive knowledge of risk assessment, students and families, systems capacity, and professional judgment. Such skills need consistent refinement and updating. Every new initiative that policymakers construct becomes an additional responsibility of school leaders. The executive budget alone would establish two new initiatives that will fall to school leaders. The Back to Basics Reading and FAFSA initiatives will both need the strong leadership of school administrators. There needs to be a corresponding obligation to provide rapid information and training for building administrators, and the space and time to avail themselves of such training. SAANYS is requesting \$750,000 to provide needed professional development for school administrators as they continue to provide leadership during these challenging times.

Summary

The proposed FY 2025 executive budget falls short in its support for schools and instead backs away from realizing a consistent and predictable approach to financing foundation aid. Although increased funding for mental health services in schools is an excellent start, larger scale efforts are needed to ensure that adequate staffing in all areas of student support is available, and schools have sufficient resources to ensure the safety of students and staff.