



Testimony for Joint Hearing on Elementary Education
February 1, 2024

Good afternoon.

My name is Max Prime. I have the privilege of serving the New York Library Association (NYLA) as their Director of Government Relations and Advocacy. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our state's libraries, library systems, and the more than 10 million New Yorkers who hold library cards.

I begin today by acknowledging the ostensibly improved circumstances of my testimony relative to the context of remarks delivered by NYLA in past years. Following the Legislature's successful fight to restore State Aid for Libraries and Library Construction in last year's enacted budget, Governor Hochul's FY2025 Executive Budget is the first in nine years not to propose cuts to either program. Likewise, it is the first in nine years to propose increasing Library Operating Aid without a corresponding cut to Aid for Library Construction.

To those ends, the FY2025 Executive Budget includes:

- \$102.1M for State Library Aid
- \$34M for Library Construction Aid
- \$3M for NOVELny.

New York's library community is grateful to both the Legislature and Governor Hochul for recognizing the need for investment in our state's libraries and library infrastructure. Nevertheless, the allocations articulated remain woefully insufficient. Even at \$102.1M, State Library Aid would still fall \$2.5M short of the \$104.6M that is statutory under state Education Law and sit \$700,000 below the level of aid awarded in FY2008. Meanwhile, flat funding of \$34M for Construction Aid constitutes just 1.9% of estimated statewide need.

Our libraries and library systems are vital institutions of foundational and lifelong learning. They advance literacy, promote equity in education, and bridge gaps in access to critical resources for marginalized populations. With adequate funding as outlined below, our libraries can innovate and develop ways to serve the rapidly evolving needs of their patrons. Without it, they will struggle to even maintain the core services they already perform.

State Library Aid:

The State Library Aid program is the primary source of funding for New York's library systems, which provide shared services and resources to each library in New York. These system services ensure that every community, and every New Yorker, regardless of relative wealth, has access to quality library materials and services. Library system services are efficient, effective, and empower libraries. According to the State Education Department (SED), each dollar invested in the State Library Aid program returns seven dollars in local library services.

The unfortunate reality is that sustained underfunding across three decades has led to depleted services, degraded technology assets, and diminished educational programming. Since the program's start in FY1992, State Library Aid has been underfunded by over \$207M relative to the level of spending statutory under Education Law, with over \$154M of that gap coming in the last 15 years alone.

As such, New York's libraries and systems require substantially greater investment if they are to weather the storm of soaring operational costs, expensive intellectual freedom challenges, and emerging community needs.

NYLA is requesting \$147.1M in State Library Aid this year.

Library Construction:

For the past several years, the Executive has slashed Library Construction Aid; the last four years by \$20M. As a result, every year, the Legislature has the responsibility to identify and resecure the aid. Unfortunately, even with Governor Hochul's proposal to maintain last year's level of spending, this process has left the program stagnant and underfunded. With each successive year of underfunding, the level of statewide need continues to grow.

For the period spanning 2021 and 2025, the New York State Library estimated overall public library construction need at \$1.53 billion. For the period spanning 2023 to 2027, that need has increased by \$220 million. Our libraries will continue to age, existing issues will compound, the price of labor, materials, and operating expenses will go up, and without action libraries' abilities to serve patrons will diminish.

NYLA is requesting a \$69.4M allocation to the state's Library Construction Program.

Instructional Materials Aid:

Library Materials Aid (LMA) is reimbursement-based financial support meant to bolster local funds budgeted for school library programs. LMA is a category of Instructional Materials Aid, along with aid for textbooks, software, and hardware. Aid for each is essential to ensure students have access to educational materials and technology.

Since 1994, the per pupil rate for library materials has only increased \$4.25. Currently, school districts are eligible to receive up to \$6.25 per pupil for those attending public and nonpublic schools within their boundaries for such materials. This allocation level has remained flat since 2007, when the current level was set in the year's Education, Labor, and Family Assistance Article VII legislation.

District costs for hardware, software, textbooks, and library materials have increased significantly over the last 17 years. Per the most recent data available from the School Library Journal, the average cost of a new hardcover book is \$26.25 when purchased by a school library – more than four times the current level of aid.

This reality, combined with Chapter 571 of the Laws of 2023 expanding the definition of library materials to include digital material, means that school librarians desperately need additional resources to ensure collections are modern, culturally responsive, reflect student interest, and meet the educational needs of all the learners they serve.

NYLA is requesting an increase in the rate of Library Materials Aid to \$11.00/per pupil

NOVELny:

NOVELny is a web-based suite of databases and digital resources featuring hundreds of magazines, journals, newspapers, maps, charts, research, and reference materials available to all New Yorkers free of charge. Without action, the New York State Library will run out of funds to operate NOVELny on June 30 of this year.

Originating as a pilot program in the year 2000, NOVELny has since become embedded as a crucial resource for patrons in school, public, and academic libraries, as well as for individuals who access it remotely. In 2022 alone, New Yorkers used the platform to conduct 25 million searches, with a large portion of its users coming from school libraries in districts where the independent purchase of database packages would be prohibitively expensive.

By taking advantage of state contract rates and purchasing centrally, each dollar spent will provide \$97 worth of access for New Yorkers. Furthermore, it ensures equity of access to high quality reference and research materials for all New York State students and residents, regardless of community, school district, or personal circumstance.

NYLA is requesting \$3M for the continuation of NOVELny

The Future of Libraries:

Libraries cannot continue to serve their communities and students with the proposed budget. We implore the Legislature to invest in our state's libraries so that your constituents, our patrons, and our communities can thrive.

Library Aid: \$147.1M

Library Construction: \$69.4M

Instructional Material Aid: \$11.00/pupil

NOVELny: \$3M

