



# *Testimony*

**to the  
Senate Finance Committee and  
Assembly Ways and Means Committee  
on the Proposed 2025-26 Executive Budget  
for Elementary and Secondary Education**

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*Representing nearly 700,000 professionals in education and healthcare  
Affiliated with the AFT – NEA – AFL-CIO*

Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Pretlow, honorable members of the Legislature and distinguished staff, I am Melinda Person, President of New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). NYSUT represents nearly 700,000 teachers, school-related professionals, academic and professional faculty and staff in higher education, professionals in education, in healthcare and retirees statewide.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the proposed 2025-26 New York State Executive Budget for Elementary and Secondary Education. I want to thank the Legislature for your strong partnership during the last legislative session.

Before we dig into the details of the budget before us, I'd like to acknowledge something we too rarely celebrate: the remarkable success story of New York's public schools.

Despite serving a student population where 56 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch – significantly higher than surrounding states – with 142 languages spoken in New York City schools alone, our system continues to excel. New York ranks second nationally in Advanced Placement exam scores, with an increasing percentage of students taking these challenging courses, demonstrating our commitment to providing rigorous academic opportunities to our students.

Behind these successes stands one of the nation's most qualified and dedicated teaching forces. Every day, in classrooms across our state, these educators demonstrate their commitment to excellence – whether they're helping a student master advanced calculus, teaching a child to read in their second language or ensuring a hungry student has breakfast before starting their day. Their work embodies the principle that every child deserves not just an education, but an opportunity to thrive.

These remarkable achievements also reflect years of thoughtful policy decisions. Our lawmakers and leaders – at every level – have consistently recognized that investing in education means investing in our future. When difficult choices arose, they understood that supporting our schools wasn't just another budget line item – it was a commitment to our children, our communities and our state's prosperity.

This past year, as I've traveled to schools across the state, I've witnessed incredible opportunities for New York's students and the amazing work of our schools and educators. I've seen high school students engaged in college-level debates on challenging subjects. I've watched as hands-on learning programs teach our children valuable, real-world job skills. In Buffalo, a public school's culinary program runs a full-service restaurant open to the community. In Oswego, students interviewed me in their professional television broadcast studio. On Long Island, I observed students practicing debate in a mock courtroom where they learn about our legal system. One district over, at a BOCES campus, students were preparing for diverse careers – from training as tomorrow's airline pilots to learning marine motor service and repair.

If you find yourself sometimes doubting our ability to overcome challenges, I invite you to visit a school with me. You'll see what I see: students eagerly tackling projects you and I wouldn't have dreamed of in our day, and educators whose dedication to their students will seem superhuman but will be 'all in a day's work' to them. You'll also quickly notice just how much is now required of our public schools, their faculty and staff.

That brings me to the reality we face today with this budget. While our schools are achieving remarkable things, they're also being asked to do more than ever before – taking on responsibilities we never imagined for public education.

Public schools throughout the state have become essential hubs where students, families and entire communities can access vital services. These supports range from individual teachers quietly using their own money to provide students with food, toiletries and other essentials, all the way to robust, well-organized Community School programs with dedicated spaces for food pantries, clothing closets and laundry facilities. Many schools now host physical and mental health services through established partnerships between schools and community organizations, serving not just students, but their entire families. The Connected Community School program in Herkimer, Oneida and Madison counties exemplifies this holistic approach, offering programs that help parents navigate healthcare systems and access mental health support, recognizing that supporting families strengthens the entire school community.

Our educators and schools take on these responsibilities not by choice, but out of necessity. As the 2024 New York State Teacher of the Year, Zach Arenz, puts it: "In order for me to do my job, I have to make sure students' basic needs are met first. There's very little learning that can happen easily when a student is worried about everything else in their life first."

The core mission of our public schools extends beyond teaching children – we're helping raise tomorrow's adults, preparing them to be successful, well-rounded contributors to society. When our educators and schools become lifelines for students, families and communities, they do so because meeting these basic needs is essential to fulfilling their educational mission.

What we're seeing across New York is remarkable: countless daily moments of learning, personal connection, nurturing and innovation coming together to create something extraordinary. Every time a teacher helps a struggling reader break through, every time a school nurse provides critical care, every time a classroom buzzes with discovery – these moments add up. Together, they've built a statewide public education system that leads the nation. We must recognize and support this expanded role, understanding that our schools' strength comes from these individual acts of dedication multiplied across classrooms and communities throughout New York.

Many NYSUT members have adopted a motto that captures both the promise and challenges of our schools: 'Public schools are the centers of our communities.'

This is as true as it is aspirational. With each budget item you consider, you help determine whether our public schools will continue their remarkable upward trajectory and keep delivering for students, families, communities and our state.

Thank you for your time and attention to these crucial budget issues that will decide the future of our state.

## **School and Foundation Aid**

The Foundation Aid formula was developed to ensure adequate funding so that all school districts can meet the constitutional charge to provide a “sound basic education” for our students. This formula is intended to achieve equity, by directing funding to public school districts with the greatest needs.

The executive budget proposal provides \$37.365 billion in school aid, representing a 4.75 percent increase over last year, with a \$1.464 billion increase (5.87 percent) in Foundation Aid. The executive budget proposes four changes to the Foundation Aid formula: First, it replaces the 2020 Census data with the Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE). Second, it substitutes free- and reduced-price lunch data with economically disadvantaged data compiled annually by SED. Both changes were recommended by the Board of Regents and the Rockefeller Institute study on Foundation Aid. Third, the proposal modifies the maximum State Share Ratio for low-wealth districts driving additional Foundation Aid to those districts. Fourth, it modifies one of the four state sharing ratios to enhance Foundation Aid payments to certain below-average wealth school districts.

In addition, the executive budget proposal includes a 2 percent minimum increase in Foundation Aid for all districts.

NYSUT supports additional updates to the Foundation Aid formula, including:

- Adding growth aid to address current-year enrollment increases;
- Modifying the weighting for English language learners to reflect the actual costs of providing appropriate services;
- Exploring methods of funding special education to reflect actual time and resources spent supporting these students;
- Examining and updating regional cost index changes; and
- Adding Universal Pre-Kindergarten to the formula to increase its use and availability throughout the state by building capacity in school districts and revising school success measurements.

The Foundation amount per pupil serves as the base figure used to calculate Foundation Aid for all school districts. While the executive budget makes no recommendation regarding changes to the Foundation amount, NYSUT and other educational stakeholders prefer using graduation rates rather than grades 3-8 standardized tests as the measurement of “successful schools,” contrary to the Rockefeller Institute’s recommendations. Graduation rates measure the education system as a whole, and the Court of Appeals in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit determined that a meaningful high school education – as measured by the graduation rate – was the appropriate measurement of a school district’s “success” level.

## **BOCES/Career and Technical Education (CTE)**

Across the state, schools are implementing innovative, hands-on learning programs that are revolutionizing education. These programs not only equip students with essential skills for high-tech jobs but also cultivate crucial workplace competencies in collaborative problem-solving and adaptable thinking.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs serve as a vital bridge between education and industry, offering students immersive, experiential learning that directly aligns with in-demand careers. From robotics and forensics to cybersecurity and agriculture, these programs precisely match both student interests and employer needs.

The power of these programs lies in their "learn by doing" approach. Abstract concepts transform into practical applications – figures become project budgets, mathematical concepts translate into essential measurements and data analysis drives real-world construction projects. CTE graduates emerge fully prepared to either pursue four-year degrees or immediately enter the workforce with in-demand skills.

These programs are critical to workforce development, simultaneously attracting major employers to New York while empowering our young people to build rewarding careers within the state. The success of this approach is already evident – in December 2023, semiconductor giant Micron Inc. demonstrated its confidence in New York's CTE pipeline by pledging millions of dollars in partnership with the state to develop the skilled workforce needed for the semiconductor industry.

Across the state, our BOCES programs are major hubs for these types of vital career preparation. On one BOCES campus on Long Island, programs range from cosmetology and commercial pilot training to law enforcement preparation and computer services. In Queens, I visited an agricultural education program (yes, in Queens) and a crime scene forensics education lab.

Two consistent themes emerge whenever I visit BOCES programs: First, their innovative and wide-ranging career training is in great demand, both from students and employers; and second, BOCES is not sufficiently funded to meet that demand. Programs across the state have long waitlists of students eager to enter their desired fields, while employers are desperately seeking the trained workers that BOCES produces.

The bottleneck is clear: our BOCES programs simply cannot hire and retain qualified instructors with necessary specialized skills because of outdated funding formulas. Since 1992, the state has only provided aid for the first \$30,000 of a BOCES instructor's salary, which has created significant financial constraints that limit these crucial programs. The example below illustrates the significant financial constraints this outdated law imposes on these crucial programs.

Year	Salary (Base, Adjusted for Inflation)	Aid Ratio	Local Share
1992	\$30,000	A district with a 60 percent Aid Ratio received $\$30,000 \times .6 = \$18,000$ in BOCES aid.	\$12,000
2024	\$60,000	Same district still gets $\$30,000 \times .6 = \$18,000$ in BOCES Aid	\$42,000
The effective aid ratio is not 60 percent – it is 30 percent.			

NYSUT urges the Legislature to update the BOCES funding formula to make these vital services more financially accessible to school districts by covering a larger portion of program costs.

The current Special Services Aid funding levels, particularly affecting the Big 5 city school districts, have forced local schools to shoulder an unsustainable financial burden, resulting in underfunded programs.

The equation is simple: Students want these programs and employers need the skilled workers they produce. For our state's economic future, we must strengthen BOCES as the critical link in this chain.

NYSUT calls on the Legislature to incorporate provisions from S.528 (Mayer) of 2025/A.7481-A (Conrad) of 2024 into the budget to strengthen and expand BOCES and CTE programs statewide. In addition, the per-pupil funding level for special services aid – a level that has remained unchanged for over two decades, should also be updated. Lastly, NYSUT urges the Legislature to extend special services aid coverage to include ninth graders in the Big 5 districts.

## **Distraction-Free Schools**

In school hallways, cellphones are almost as ubiquitous as backpacks, and educators and families across New York agree it's a problem.

In September, NYSUT hosted a "Disconnected" summit, gathering stakeholders to address the issue of digital distractions in schools. The consensus was clear: elected officials, educators, parents, students, administrators, school board members, superintendents, mental health professionals and safety experts agreed that the constant use of personal electronics severely disrupts learning during the school day.

Research consistently shows that cellphones interfere with students' academic performance, social and emotional growth and mental health. These devices not only hamper students' ability to focus on lessons but also deprive them of crucial opportunities for face-to-face communication and genuine connection. Instead, students face constant exposure to toxic content, cyberbullying, exploitation and unrealistic standards.

Safety experts have also noted that, contrary to popular belief, phones can make students less safe during emergencies. During a crisis, students need to focus on instructions and stay aware of their surroundings – not be distracted by devices or exposed to potentially dangerous misinformation spreading on social media.

We applaud the governor's proposal requiring "bell-to-bell" restrictions on smartphones – from school opening to dismissal – with appropriate exceptions (such as for instructional purposes, student health needs and translation services). By implementing these restrictions, we can give students approximately seven hours each school day to be fully present and free from the pressures of phones and social media.

Schools that have already implemented similar policies report dramatic improvements in student engagement, mental health and overall school climate. Students are more focused on learning from their teachers and each other, creating a transformed educational environment.

The allocation of \$13.5 million in additional funding will support schools in implementing this vital initiative this fall, ensuring policies can be effectively adopted and consistently enforced without diverting resources from other programs. The Legislature should consider additional funding for this important program to facilitate a smooth transition and implementation process.

## **Community Schools**

Community Schools serve as vital hubs in the regions they serve, making them a critical center of community life. In short, they take the “Public schools are the centers of our communities” motto to its ultimate extension.

Through dedicated programs, these schools are designed to provide wrap-around services that support family health, community safety and children’s needs in various ways.

While most often associated with urban districts, the community school model succeeds in suburban and rural areas as well. Each community school uniquely reflects and responds to the specific needs of the community it serves.

NYSUT’s recent visits across the state demonstrate this adaptability. Here are just a few examples of Community School models we’ve seen work across the state:

- In Albany and New York City, Community Schools provide transportation assistance, healthcare access and on-site laundry facilities;
- In rural Ilion, Herkimer County, the Community School has what they call the “community hub,” a dedicated space that offers students supplemental food, toiletries and hygiene supplies – resources that students and their families can access without stigma; and
- In Herkimer, Madison and Onieda counties, the Connected Community Schools initiative provides school-based services as well as mental health services and helps parents and families navigate the complexities of state and local delivery systems for child welfare, probation, mental health, public health and substance abuse.

Each Community School is led by a community school director or coordinator who forges connections between the school and local organizations to align available services with family and student needs.

The return on investment is substantial: In New York City, UFT’s United Community Schools’ data shows that a \$100,000 investment in a community school director generated more than \$600,000 in services and grants – a 6-to-1 return. In Central New York’s network encompassing Waterville, Rome, Dolgeville and the Town of Webb, the return exceeds \$14 for every \$1 invested. Despite these impressive outcomes, State Education Department data reveals that less than 2 percent of school districts have a community school director.

NYSUT urges the Legislature to allocate \$100 million in categorical aid to expand community schools, which would significantly increase the number of community schools and strengthen communities throughout our state.

## **Universal School Meals**

Every educator knows that a hungry child cannot learn. NYSUT members see the critical link between nutrition and academic success play out in their classrooms every day. When students are hungry, they struggle to focus, participate and absorb new information. Making sure our children are fed isn't just about nutrition – it's about creating the basic conditions necessary for learning to occur.

This reality touches every corner of our state. With more than 760,000 children living in poverty in New York, there are students in need in every school district, in every community.

In recent years, we've made significant progress in providing free school meals to more children throughout the state, but gaps remain.

NYSUT strongly supports the governor's proposal to increase funding by \$120 million to eliminate those gaps, establish Universal Free School Meals and fully cover all schools, ensuring all New York students can eat school breakfast and lunch at no charge, regardless of income or school, beginning in 2025-26.

## **Educator Tax Credit**

In a recent survey of NYSUT members, we confirmed what we've long known: educators routinely reach into their own pockets to support their students and classrooms. An overwhelming 92 percent of teachers reported spending their own money on classroom supplies, while 83 percent purchased basic necessities like food and hygiene items for their students. More than half spent over \$500 annually, and one in five invested more than \$1,000 of their personal funds.

These expenses range from basic classroom supplies like pencils, paper and books to essential items that many of us take for granted – snacks for hungry students, winter coats, hygiene products and even clothing. Our educators don't do this because it's required; they do it because they see their students' needs and can't look away. As one teacher noted in our survey, "When a child is hungry or cold or embarrassed about their worn-out clothes, they can't focus on learning. Sometimes the fastest solution is to just help them myself."

Our educators step up to meet these needs without hesitation – it's part of their commitment to their students' success and wellbeing. While educators embrace this role as an extension of their dedication to teaching, the financial burden shouldn't fall on their shoulders alone. The state has both an opportunity and an obligation to support teachers who are already going above and beyond for their students.

The federal government currently allows teachers to deduct up to \$300 of unreimbursed educational expenses (\$600 if spouses are educators filing jointly). This deduction does not sufficiently cover the significant out-of-pocket costs educators incur each year to cover the needs of their students.



Therefore, NYSUT supports establishing a \$1,000 educator tax credit to help offset these personal expenditures. This credit would acknowledge the significant financial burden our educators' shoulder while helping to ensure they can continue supporting their students' needs. It's an investment not just in our teachers, but in the daily learning and wellbeing of students across our state.

## **Teacher Recruitment and Certification**

Realizing that we need more teachers and school-related professionals, we should expand financial supports that meet people where they are. Our schools need more teacher aides and assistants, bus drivers, custodians and support staff, on top of the need for more teachers and educational leaders. There are programs in place that offer financial supports, yet more is needed. We should expand the governor's Teacher Residency Program and the funding supporting programs for career changers and teaching assistants. For those New Yorkers interested in working in our public schools, many of whom are in lower income brackets, we should cover expenses that seem small but represent true barriers, such as the cost of fingerprinting, mandated certification exams and workshops and the cost of obtaining the necessary degrees to become a teacher.

We therefore recommend that the state expand grants and reimbursement opportunities to cover a variety of expenses including certification costs such as:

- **Fingerprinting (\$1.5M):** The state should pay for the cost of fingerprinting for teachers and SRPs;
- **Teacher Aides Mandated Certification Exams (\$6.25M):** The state should pay for the mandated certification exams and workshop fees; and
- **Teacher Certification Tests (\$2.1M)** The state should cover the cost of certification exams.

## **Special Schools**

Across New York state, NYSUT members work in specialized educational settings that serve our most vulnerable students. These dedicated educators – in Special Act, 853, and 4201 Schools and 4410 Programs – work with students facing significant medical, physical, and/or emotional challenges that require more intensive support than traditional public schools can provide.

The educators and support staff in these settings face unique challenges that demand additional resources and support. They work intensively with smaller groups of students who require significant individual attention and specialized care. Success in these settings requires not just teaching expertise, but also a deep understanding of various disabilities, behavioral challenges and therapeutic approaches.

To maintain the quality of education and care in these specialized settings, we must address the critical issue of staff retention. NYSUT is seeking an increase of \$20 million in funding for Excessive Teacher Turnover Grants (ETTG), to help retain qualified educators in these demanding roles.

Additionally, these schools rely heavily on specialized support staff – speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists and others – who are essential to student development and success. To ensure stability in these crucial support positions, NYSUT calls on the Legislature to create and allocate \$40 million to a new Direct Care Support Turnover Grant program.

## **Teacher Centers**

The Legislature established Teacher Centers as New York's primary state-funded initiative for educator professional development. These centers provide crucial support services to over 200 high-need districts, BOCES, non-public and charter schools, developing responsive programs that address evolving educational needs.

Teacher Centers offer a wide range of essential programs: professional development for mentor teachers; parent workshops on technology and learning support strategies; training in robotics and coding; 3D science instruction; and enhancement of pre-K through 12 content knowledge. They also provide specialized support for special education teachers and those working with struggling learners, students with disabilities and English language learners.

The executive budget proposal eliminates the funding for Teacher Centers for the 2025-26 school year. We advocate for the restoration of this program at a \$40 million dollar appropriation. This investment is essential to support New York's educators, enhance student achievement and ensure teachers have the tools they need to be effective in the classroom.

## **Many Threads, One Fabric**

Through the 'Many Threads, One Fabric' training series, NYSUT has reached thousands of educators across the state, helping them recognize and overcome implicit bias. This program helps educators bridge cultural divides and create more welcoming, inclusive schools for people of all abilities and backgrounds by expanding perspectives beyond individual worldviews.

Thanks to the Legislature's consistent support over the past four budgets, this successful program has delivered inclusive, research-based best practices that make a real difference in classrooms and communities.

The initiative continues to grow. In December, NYSUT convened the first-ever meeting of the Members of Color Affinity and Action (MoCCA) group, connecting and engaging members of color and allies who recognize the vital importance of diversity in our schools.

While funding for this initiative was not included in the executive budget, we are requesting \$2 million to continue delivering these essential services and opportunities to our members. This investment will help ensure our schools remain welcoming spaces where all students can thrive.

## **Continue to “Fix Tiers 5 & 6”**

It has been over a decade since Tier 6 became part of the New York state pension system. Since then, over 100,000 NYSUT members (and hundreds of thousands of other public-sector workers) earn a significantly reduced pension compared to earlier tiers. The impact is stark: while a Tier 4 member retiring at age 55 with 30 years of service would receive 60 percent of their Final Average Salary, a Tier 6 member with the same years of service would receive just 26.4 percent – despite paying tens of thousands more into the system over their career.

Thanks to your partnership and commitment to our educators, we've made significant progress in addressing these inequities. However, our work is not complete. The substantially reduced pension under Tier 6 continues to undervalue the education profession and has become a major contributor to the teacher shortage. At a time when we need to attract and retain talented educators, this two-tiered system sends the wrong message about how New York values their work and their future security.

Tier 6 creates an inequitable system where new public workers receive significantly fewer benefits than their colleagues, despite doing the same vital work. To make education a profession of choice and ensure we can attract the next generation of talented educators, our members need retirement plans they can rely on.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with the Labor Community and the Legislature to address the remaining inequities in Tier 6 until we achieve parity with Tier 4.

## **Climate Smart Sustainable Schools**

Schools and educators play an essential role in engaging students in credible, science-based, hands-on learning about climate change and preparing our students for robust job opportunities in green technologies, construction and restoration efforts. Our schools are living laboratories of learning and educators can play a leadership role in modeling climate and environmentally friendly practices such as building design, energy use, land use that is green and pollinator friendly, water conservation, waste disposal, composting and recycling.

With this in mind, we must recognize that many of our education buildings throughout the state – k-12 and public higher education – need basic repairs and upgrades to their heating and air conditioning/circulation systems, deteriorating rooftops and outdated electrical systems that do not meet the needs of today's educational structure. These buildings should be healthy and safe for all students and staff.

Therefore, we urge the state to begin the process of passing a \$2 billion Carbon Free and Healthy Schools Bond Act, which would go before the voters in 2026.

With the right financial resources at our disposal, we can make a bold change for our students, make school buildings a model of green infrastructure, make schools healthier and safer for students and the school community, create good union jobs and save schools and taxpayers millions in energy costs.

## **Charter Schools**

Charter schools were created to serve as laboratories for developing and sharing innovative educational practices with public schools. While well-intended, this promise of collaboration and shared learning has gone largely unfulfilled, even as charter schools continue to receive substantial state funding.

Experience has shown that the corporate charter school industry often prioritizes business interests over the well-being of all students, educators and families. Many charters operate without meaningful public input or accountability to taxpayers. Where public schools willingly accept all students and unite our communities through inclusive education and local control, charter schools often exclude students who don't fit their business model and create division by operating outside these democratic structures.

NYSUT is advocating for two pieces of legislation to bring necessary transparency and accountability to the charter industry. The first is S.77 (Liu)/A.4502 of 2024 (Benedetto), which would give the Board of Regents final approval authority over all proposed and renewed charter schools. This will ensure the charter industry operates under a uniform application approval process that considers fiscal, programmatic and educational stability for all students in the school district. Second, NYSUT is advocating for S.4466 (Hoylman-Sigal)/A.4458 (Benedetto) of 2024, which would establish essential transparency and accountability requirements for the charter industry.

## **Conclusion**

As I close, I want to return to where we began – celebrating the remarkable success story of New York's public schools while acknowledging the expanding role they play in our communities. The achievements we discussed earlier – from rising graduation rates to innovative career programs – didn't happen by accident. They are the direct result of your consistent commitment to public education and willingness to adapt policy to meet evolving needs.

Our schools have become more than just places of learning – they are the centers of our communities, providing essential services and support that extend far beyond the classroom. As you consider this budget, you have the opportunity to strengthen these vital institutions and build upon our shared successes. Each investment you make isn't just in buildings or programs – it's an investment in communities, in families and most importantly, in the future of every child in New York state.

Thank you for your thoughtful attention to these crucial issues and for your continued partnership in supporting public education. Together, we can ensure that New York's schools remain not just among the nation's finest but continue to evolve and grow as true centers of community life and learning.