

Testimony of

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

By

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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 225,000 members of NYS PTA and the parents and families of our 2.6 million school children. It is our mission to make every child's potential a reality and support EVERY child with ONE voice.

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 thank our educators, teachers, school-related professionals, school leaders, mental health professionals, and staff for their tireless commitment and dedication in our schools each, and every day, and truly thank the legislature, Education Commissioner Rosa and the Board of Regents for your continued commitment to our children, their families, their educators and our schools.

This year, we also thank Governor Hochul and this Executive Budget.

At a time when our students struggle with food insecurity and poverty, heightened need for mental health support, increased need for academic intervention, and supports for migrant students, students with disabilities, homeless students, English Language Learners, and ALL children, this Executive Budget supports them. We are wholly supportive of the many initiatives in this Executive Budget, and look forward to their enactment.

School Aid

The Executive Budget provides \$37.4 billion in total School Aid for SFY 2026, and increases expected school aid by \$1.7 billion, or 4.7%:

1. \$1.5 billion increase (5.9%) in Foundation Aid
2. \$230 million increase (2.1%) in other programs including fully funding expense-based aids, categorial aids and competitive grants.

It also begins to update the Foundation Aid formula by updating two measures of the percentage of low-income students in a school district.

1. The 2000 Census poverty rate is replaced with the most recent Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates data
2. Now unreliable Free and Reduced-Price Lunch data is replaced with economically disadvantaged data, which purports to better reflect our current population of low-income students.

Further, the proposal also changes the formula to provide additional aid to low-wealth school districts and ensures each district receives at least a 2% increase in school aid. Of note, NYS PTA does not support any Foundation Aid set-asides for any purposes.

NYS PTA strongly supports this proposal. This is a meaningful investment in our children, and with inclusion of a minimum funding level, ensures some level of state support for all school districts.

Expense-Based Aids

The Executive Budget includes formula 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 \$230 million, or a 2.2% increase.

NYS PTA strongly supports this proposal.

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

For the first time, the Executive Budget includes FULL funding for School Meals for All at \$340 million, a \$160 million increase over last year, requiring that all schools that participate in the national school lunch program (public, charter, and nonpublic) provide free breakfast and lunch meals to all students.

Under this program, the state will pay the student's share of the cost for all meals served to students not already receiving free meals.

No parent, no family, no educator, no one wants to see a child hungry. But that is what has happened. For some, school is the only place they receive a warm or healthy meal. 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.

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

NYS PTA supports this proposal in the STRONGEST terms, and seeks its full inclusion in the final enacted budget.

Preschool and Summer School Special Education Programs

The Executive Budget fully funds the State share of costs for preschool and summer school special education programs, which benefit 80,000 and 50,000 children respectively, and includes an increase in reimbursement to school districts for the cost of summer school services.

In all, the proposal provides:

- \$1.1 billion to reimburse counties for the cost of preschool special education services, which reflects a \$57 million increase of 5.5%, and
- \$413 million to reimburse school districts for the cost of summer school services, which reflects a \$9 million increase of 2.2%.

NYS PTA strongly supports these proposals and looks for future funding increases for our students with disabilities. One issue of note is the high cost of transportation for these services, which is often driven by bussing contracts. This issue is on the radar for NYS PTA as we look for future conversations and solutions.

Literacy/Libraries

The Executive Budget increases supports for Library Aid by \$0.7 million, and includes \$34 million for Capital funds for library construction. Further, the proposal continues the \$3 million to fund the NY Online Virtual Electronic Library (NOVELny).

We also support the \$1 million for new media literacy resources for parents, families and children.

NYS PTA fully supports these proposals, and looks for a further increase in the support for Library Aid.

Early High School, P-TECH, Community schools, STEM

We continue to support ECHS, P-TECH, Community Schools, BOCES, and STEM programs, and support the \$65 million for the College in High School Opportunity Fund, which includes Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools and Smart Scholars Early College High Schools. We also support the \$96 million for the Employment Preparation Education program.

We continue to seek increases in all of these essential programs that truly support our children, as they lead to greater graduation rates and success in college and career.

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

Limitations on Internet Enabled Devices in Schools

The Executive Budget offers language which limits the use of smartphones and other internet enabled devices on school grounds during the bells, with necessary allowances for use in times of emergency, or for health, safety, learning uses, and certainly for students with disabilities or medical needs. The proposal provides \$13.5 million for implementation.

We agree that our classrooms and schools must remain places of learning, collaboration, and cooperation where our students continue to thrive – free from unnecessary distractions.

We thank Governor Hochul for listening to NYS PTA, parents, families, educators, students, and other stakeholders in drafting this legislation – which seems to balance common sense limitations to support in-class learning and socialization, and includes allowances for necessary usage of devices, all while ensuring local control and feedback in development of local policies.

We are also thankful that the draft allows for local development of policies, giving wide discretion to school districts to work with their stakeholders to develop a meaningful plan that works for their students. Further, we are pleased that the proposal mandates that each policy

must include how parents and families are able to contact their children during the day, with clear communication avenues, when needed.

The health, wellness, and mental health of our children are of highest priority, and NYS PTA supports these locally developed and collaborative policies.

Support for State-Owned Special Schools

NYS PTA supports the proposals for:

- \$3 million for the State School for the Deaf in Rome
- \$4.5 million for the State School for the Blind in Batavia
- \$20.1 million for three state owned schools on Native American reservations (the Onondaga School, the St. Regis Mohawk School, and the Tuscarora School)

School-based Mental Health Programs

We continue to support the work of the NYS Office of Mental Health and State Education Department, to support student and school-based mental health services, and fully support expansion of school based mental health clinics, and the state's commitment to fund any school district which implements this program.

We also support the new \$1.5 million investment to expand teen Mental Health First Aid training, to train both teens and adults who work with youth to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges, including the impacts of bullying and school violence.

We fully support the \$10 million to establish up to 7 new clubhouses and 4 new Youth Safe Spaces in NYS – to provide youth with access to behavioral wellness resources, foster positive relationships with their peers, and receive support in a positive setting.

We have just launched our 3rd Mental Health Survey for parents, families and educators, and will share results as they are finalized. In our second survey last year, we asked families and educators which youth mental health issues were most important facing our students today. The results showed alarming trends:

- Anxiety – 87.6% of respondents felt anxiety was the most important mental health issue facing our students today
- Social Media – 82.1%
- Depression – 71.2%
- Bullying – 65.7%
- Suicide or Suicidal Thoughts/Ideation – 33.4%
- Cyberbullying – 56.7%
- Substance Use – 34.1%
- Youth Violence – 23.9%
- Other issues listed facing students included (in no particular order): school refusal (12.6%), disordered eating (11.9%), abuse, domestic violence, body image and shaming, self-esteem, social acceptance, gender identity and expression, LGTBQ+ acceptance, divorce and family separation, screen time, digital addiction, anger, gun violence,

loneliness, post-pandemic coping, peer pressure, academic pressure, academic recovery, testing pressure

We are pleased that NYS PTA Executive Director Kyle Belokopitsky continues to serve with the Mental Health Association in NYS's Mental Health Advisory Committee. We proudly expanded our work with the NYS Office of Mental Health on a number of initiatives and programs, and the work of the NYS PTA Mental Health Task Force continues - which has expanded NYS PTA mental health programs, identified new ways to support youth mental health, and increased community and school partnerships. We also continue to work with SED, MHANYS, the NYS School Counselors Association, the NYS Health Department, the NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, NY Council on Problem Gambling, and other like state and federal agencies, offices and stakeholders.

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

Afterschool Support

NYS PTA supports continued investments in high-quality afterschool programming, and supports all state funding in these categories.

Teacher Support Initiatives

The Executive Budget includes a number of teacher support initiatives.

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

Charter Schools

The Executive Budget provides \$190 million for charter school supplemental tuition and \$145 million for charter school facilities aid.

NYS PTA continues to be seriously concerned with diverting 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 continue to be strongly opposed to the elimination of any statewide or regional cap on the number of charters that may be issued. We also remain opposed to reissuance of "ghost charter" licenses. 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 the students who attend them.

Nonpublic Schools

The Executive Budget includes \$228.4 million for nonpublic schools for mandated aid (a 4.7% increase), and \$85.5 million for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) instruction (a 10% increase), and \$70 million for capital health and safety projects, including critical repair

and maintenance of nonpublic schools' facilities. We support these proposals and the students and families in our nonpublic schools.

Investments in SUNY and CUNY

The Executive Budget includes a number of increases in funding to support the SUNY and CUNY systems, including a new \$269 million in funding (\$138 million for SUNY state-operated campuses and \$131 million for CUNY senior colleges).

NYS PTA supports these investments in our public higher education system.

Free Community College in High Demand Occupations

The Executive Budget provides \$47 million to cover the remaining costs of tuition, fees and books for community college students ages 25-55 pursuing certain associate's degrees in occupations including teaching, nursing, technology and engineering.

NYS PTA supports these investments in our students.

Expansion of Part-Time Tap

The Executive Budget expanding part-time TAP to students who are taking a minimum of three credits, down from six.

NYS PTA supports these investments in our students.

Support for Justice-Involved Youth

The Executive Budget expands Medicaid coverage to provide pre and post-release services for juveniles in incarcerated settings under 21 years of age, up to age 26 for those formerly in foster care. Eligible youth will receive targeted case management services, including physical and behavior health screenings and services to better help re-entry.

NYS PTA supports these programs and our juveniles in our justice system.

Maternal, Prenatal, and Child Healthcare

NYS PTA is committed to supporting maternal, prenatal, and child health and wellness. We are pleased that the Executive Budget puts a focus on these critical areas of concern, and support the many initiatives proposed, including a new \$9.5 million to support new enrollees in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, and expansion of lactation support services. We also support the easier enrollment in SNAP and WIC, connecting more families to benefits.

We also support the Baby2Baby program, and the \$10 million to provide mental health support, newborn supply boxes, and diapers, to low-income families, and the \$1.5 million to expand maternal mental health services.

NYS PTA supports these proposals.

Childcare Affordability and Access

The Executive Budget includes \$1.8 billion in childcare assistance, including:

- \$100 million in capital grants for childcare centers, counties and municipalities to expand the availability of childcare
- Support for a childcare worker substitute pool pilot program
- Creation of the NY Coalition for Child Care

NYS PTA supports these investments in childcare.

Empire State Child Tax Credit

The Executive budget increases the child tax credit for three years by increasing the maximum credit from \$330 to \$1,000 for children under 4 years old, and \$500 for children 4 to 16 years old. The proposal also eliminates the earned income requirement.

NYS PTA supports these increased tax credits.

Swimming and Drowning Prevention

The Executive Budget includes \$5 million to create a new learn to swim program for children under 4 years old.

NYS PTA supports this initiative.

Youth Homelessness

The Executive Budget adds \$3.5 million to expand services to youth who are unstably housed or homeless.

NYS PTA supports these proposals.

Youth Mentoring

The Executive Budget includes \$455,000 for mentorship for Black and Latina girls, which includes creation of a new Black Girls Mentoring Initiative and expansion of the Latina Mentoring Initiative.

NYS PTA supports these proposals.

Get Offline, Get Outside 2.0

The Executive Budget includes an increase of \$15 million for development of a youth program to create new youth opportunities in sports, drama, music, community gardens, debate, clubs, volunteering, and other youth activities.

NYS PTA supports these investments in our youth.

Youth Employment Programs

The Executive Budget includes an additional \$3.3 million to provide annual employment opportunities for at-risk youth through the Summer Youth Employment Program.

The proposal also includes \$10 million to digitize working papers for minors and create a new online portal for youth, caregivers, employers and schools.

NYS PTA supports these investments in our youth.

Clean Water

The Executive Budget provides an additional \$500 million for clean water infrastructure, which will positively impact children and families drinking water.

NYS PTA supports this proposal.

Illicit Cannabis Sales

NYS PTA continues our strongest concern with the enactment and implementation of the legalization of recreational cannabis, especially as it relates to accidental ingestion by children and hazardous driving by users. We are appreciative of the state's increased enforcement overseeing cannabis and work of the Illicit Cannabis Enforcement Task Force.

We also support the Executive Budget's inclusion of language related to Drugged Driving, that has been previously introduced in both houses.

In Conclusion

Every parent and family has 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 truly thank the legislature and Governor Hochul for this commitment to our students, and 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 Measure our Mission for Every Child, and make every child's potential a reality. No other work is more important.