



# TESTIMONY

to the  
**Senate Finance Committee and  
Assembly Ways and Means Committee  
on the Proposed 2026-27 Executive Budget  
for Elementary and Secondary Education**

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**PREPARED BY:**

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*Representing more than 700,000 professionals in education and healthcare.  
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## INTRODUCTION

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 more than 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 2026-27 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.

Great things are happening in New York schools. Graduation rates are rising. Expanded career and technical education programs are equipping students with skills for in-demand jobs in growing industries. In classrooms across the state, students are not just learning; they are thriving, discovering new passions and developing a genuine love of learning.

These successes did not happen by accident. They are the direct result of this Legislature's commitment to keeping the state's promise to our students. But even as we celebrate this progress, we must acknowledge that our work is far from complete.

Public schools and educators are being asked to do more than ever before, stepping in to fill roles we never intended for them. From addressing student mental health crises to helping families navigate poverty and instability, educators are stepping up to meet these needs gladly.

But as communities rely on schools for more and more, our educators and resources are stretched thinner. At the same time, the promise we have made to our students faces real threats from those who would divert public resources to private interests.

Meeting this moment requires continued investment, updated policies, and vigilance in protecting public education. The budget before you is an opportunity to build on our shared successes and ensure that every child in New York has access to a world-class public education.

## SCHOOL AND FOUNDATION AID

Fully funding Foundation Aid is about keeping a promise to our kids that no matter their ZIP code, their public school will have what it takes to help them thrive. When we invest in schools based on what they really need, we strengthen entire communities and build a fairer, stronger future. In 2023, after decades of advocacy, the Legislature and the Governor came through and fully funded Foundation Aid for the first time.

We are already seeing the results. Last year, the other three NYSUT officers and I visited schools in more than 200 districts across the state. The difference between now and a few years ago is staggering. Schools have begun modernizing facilities, equipment and programs. Key staff positions are getting filled to help meet student needs. There is not a school district we visit that does not have new and innovative programs that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. In just the past few months, I've visited schools with state-of-the-art career and technical training facilities designed to prepare students for in-demand fields. Computer-aided design, 3D printing and advanced fabrication are now commonplace. I've seen schools with new hydroponics labs, podcast studios and robotics labs. Art and music rooms that just a few years ago were hollowed out are now alive with activity.

However, not all schools in all districts are doing as well as we would like, and there is still work to be done. Fully funding Foundation Aid did not magically fix every old school building, or fully staff our schools to the extent currently required. And though much has changed in our schools the past few years, one thing has remained consistent regardless of funding levels: Educators still go above and beyond to help students day in and day out.

The executive budget proposal provides for a total of \$39.6 billion in school aid, representing a year-to-year funding increase of nearly \$1.6 billion and funding the Foundation Aid formula with an increase of \$779.49 million, providing a 1 percent minimum increase to all school districts. Foundation Aid is called the foundation for a reason: It is the starting point, the essential ingredient upon which everything else is built. Looking ahead, NYSUT recommends updates to the formula to ensure it continues to meet the needs of today's students.

### Updating the Foundation Amount

The state should commence a new successful schools study to update the Foundation Amount, incorporate the added responsibilities schools have taken on and recognize emerging expectations arising from changes to high school graduation requirements. In the short term, for 2026-27, we recommend increasing the Foundation Amount per child.

### Restructuring the Regional Cost Index

The most recent state budget created a regional cost index for a single county. Index values for the nine previously existing regions have never been updated. We recommend updating and restructuring the regional cost index. The current configuration of regions results in implausibly large differences in index values for neighboring districts. To minimize disruptive changes in state funding for individual districts, this change and future updates should be phased over time.

## Addressing the Property Tax Cap Interplay

The interplay between Foundation Aid and the property tax cap also needs to be assessed. The Foundation Aid formula assumes that districts with greater local wealth can raise more revenue locally, reducing their state aid. But the property tax cap may prevent those districts from actually realizing that additional local revenue without seeking an override. To address this, NYSUT urges the Legislature to set the tax cap at 2 percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is higher, and eliminate the supermajority requirement for passage.

## Providing a Larger Minimum Increase

Four out of the last five state budgets have provided a guaranteed minimum increase in Foundation Aid for all districts, recognizing that all districts face increasing costs arising from inflationary pressures. NYSUT calls for a larger minimum increase in Foundation Aid for all districts.

## Additional Formula Updates

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; and
- Revising the Pupil Needs Index to include whether additional student needs should be built into the index, such as a weighting for homeless students.

The transformation we have witnessed in schools across New York since Foundation Aid was fully funded is proof of what is possible when the state keeps its promise to students. But this work is not done. By continuing to fully fund Foundation Aid and updating the formula to reflect the realities of today's classrooms, we can ensure that every child in New York, no matter where they live, has access to the quality of public education they deserve. Strong, well-funded public schools are the centers of our communities and the future of our state.

## CONTINUE TO “FIX TIERS 5 & 6”

One of the enduring promises of public service has been the assurance of a secure retirement. For generations, dedicated educators and public workers accepted lower salaries than they might earn in the private sector, knowing that a reliable pension awaited them at the end of their careers. For tiers 5 and 6 members, that promise has been broken.

It has been over a decade since Tier 6 became part of the New York state pension system. Since then, nearly 200,000 NYSUT members — and several hundred thousand other public-sector workers — earn a significantly reduced pension compared to their colleagues in earlier tiers.

The impact is stark: while a Tier 4 member retiring at age 55 with 30 years of service receives 60 percent of their Final Average Salary with no penalty, a Tier 6 member with the same years of service receives just 26.4 percent. To receive full pension benefits, Tier 6 members must work until age 63, regardless of years of service. At the same time, these members pay significantly more into the system through inequitable contribution bands that increase as they receive contractual salary raises — costing them tens of thousands of dollars over the course of their careers.

This is patently unfair, and it is contributing directly to the shortage of teachers and other public workers across our state. At a time when we need to attract and retain talented educators, this two-tiered system sends exactly the wrong message about how New York values their work and their future security. Why would someone choose a career in public service when the benefits are so diminished compared to the colleague in the classroom next door?

We believe 30 years should be a career. Thanks to NYSUT members’ relentless advocacy and the Legislature’s partnership, we have made significant progress, reducing the vesting period from 10 to 5 years in 2022 and adjusting the Final Average Salary calculation from five to three years in 2024.

But there is more work to do. Together, we need to ensure we address the following necessary steps to properly fix tiers 5 and 6:

- Lower the retirement age: Full retirement benefits should be available at age 55 with 30 years of service, with early retirement penalties reduced to match Tier 4.
- Equal contribution rates for all: Flatten employee contributions to a standard 3 percent for all Tier 5 and Tier 6 members, ending the inequitable salary-based contribution bands.
- Restore the 20-year career incentive: Return to the 40 percent benefit at 20 years of service to reward long-term public servants.

We look forward to continuing to work with our partners in the Legislature to achieve full parity with Tier 4 workers.

## COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Educators across New York see every day how unmet basic needs keep students from thriving in school.

One of our members recently told a story about a student who was absent for almost a week. When the student returned, our member gently asked where he had been. The student confessed he had no clean clothes to wear and did not want to come to school in dirty clothes.

Another member shared the story of a 9-year-old who missed school because he felt he needed to stay home to protect his mother in a house with doors that would not properly lock.

We have heard from educators about students who serve as caretakers for younger siblings — one high school student had to make sure her younger siblings got on the bus each morning, which meant she often missed her own bus and could not get to school on time, or at all.

One in five children in New York lives in poverty, and the effects follow children to school and affect every part of their ability to learn. Two-thirds of what affects student performance comes from factors outside of the classroom.

Educators know this and deal with it daily, often spending their own money and time filling the gaps. But we should not rely on the generosity of individual educators to meet what are so obviously systemic challenges. We need a system that formalizes and funds this work.

One of the most effective tools we have is the community schools model. Community schools serve as vital hubs, providing wraparound services that support family health, community safety and children's needs. Each is unique and responsive to the specific needs of the community it serves. Each is led by a community school director who forges connections between the school and local organizations to align available services with family and student needs.

The model succeeds in urban, suburban and rural areas alike. Many community schools, such as those in Albany and New York City, provide transportation assistance, healthcare access and on-site laundry facilities. In rural Ilion, in Herkimer County, the community school established a "community hub" offering students supplemental food, toiletries and hygiene supplies that families can access without stigma. The Connected Community Schools network spanning Herkimer, Madison and Oneida counties provides on-site mental health support and helps families navigate complex state and local systems for child welfare, public health, substance abuse and probation.

The results speak for themselves. New York City data shows how community schools have outpaced the rest of the city on key indicators. For the initial cohort that started in 2014-15:

- Graduation rates increased 25.1 percentage points over 10 years compared to 11.6 for the rest of the city;
- ELA proficiency increased 22.9 percentage points compared to 19.1; and
- Math proficiency increased 26.7 percentage points compared to 18.5.

California's Community Schools Partnership Program achieved a 30 percent greater reduction in chronic absenteeism compared to similar non-community schools.

The return on investment is equally compelling. 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 districts including Waterville, Rome, Dolgeville and the Town of Webb, the return exceeds \$14 for every \$1 invested.

Despite this evident success, community school programs remain in the minority in New York. To meet the urgent needs of students and families, NYSUT urges the Legislature to allocate:

- \$100 million in categorical aid to expand community schools throughout the state;
- \$4 million to sustain UFT's network of community schools; and
- \$5 million for United Community Schools to provide statewide technical assistance and support.

## CIVIC READINESS & MEDIA LITERACY

Every student deserves an education that prepares them not only for college and careers, but for citizenship. At a time when trust in democratic institutions is strained and misinformation is widespread, strong civic education is not optional; it is essential. As we approach the 250th anniversary of the United States, we have an obligation and an opportunity to make sure students understand how our democracy works, why it matters and how they can participate in it.

On national assessments, only 22 percent of eighth graders scored proficient in civics. In New York, many students graduate without ever taking a full year of it. Only 26,000 of the state's 172,000 graduates earn the Seal of Civic Readiness, an initiative through the State Education Department that gives students the chance to demonstrate civic knowledge and participation and aligns directly with SED's Portrait of a Graduate.

Following the implementation of No Child Left Behind, school districts reported a 32 percent decrease in the amount of time devoted to social studies and civics.

In the age of social media, media literacy is inseparable from civic education. Today's students are bombarded with information, algorithms and misinformation from the moment they wake up. A Stanford study found that more than 80 percent of middle schoolers couldn't distinguish a news story from an ad, and more than half of high schoolers couldn't identify a reliable online source. Our students must learn to verify sources, recognize bias and think critically about what they see online. These are essential skills for life and citizenship, now more than ever.

Access to meaningful civic learning remains uneven and limited, but educators, students and civic partners are eager to change that. Together we are calling for a renewed commitment to civic education and media literacy that starts early, continues through graduation and reflects the realities students face in today's media-rich, rapidly changing world.

To accomplish this, we urge the Legislature to provide \$2.5 million to strengthen elementary civic education by:

- Appropriating funds for pilot programs, curriculum development and professional learning;
- Expanding evidence-based models such as the PNW BOCES integrated ELA/SS curriculum; and
- Supporting NYSED in developing statewide guidance on integrating civic competencies and dedicated instructional time.

We also ask the Legislature to allocate \$5 million to build the foundations of civic readiness by:

- Expanding access to the Seal of Civic Readiness and experiential student learning opportunities;
- Allocating funding for professional learning aligned with Portrait of a Graduate civic competencies; and
- Supporting programs such as NYSUT Educator Grants that foster authentic civic learning.

We further call upon the Legislature to provide \$15 million to modernize civic learning through media and AI literacy by:

- Ensuring every school has a fully-funded, certified library media specialist;
- Establishing a statewide task force on media and AI literacy integration in K-12, modeled after Massachusetts and Ohio;
- Supporting pilot programs and professional learning for media, information and AI literacy; and
- Adding media and AI literacy to NYSED's required instructional topics.

Finally, we call on state leaders to highlight civic education for the semiquincentennial by:

- Hosting a statewide high school essay competition entitled "America — 250 Years in the Making," with a state winner recognized as "Governor for a Day;"
- Highlighting regional winners at historic sites across New York; and
- Coordinating statewide and regional events during Civics Learning Week (March 9-13, 2026).

The semiquincentennial should be more than a celebration of our past; it should be an investment in our future. Civic education is how students learn that democracy is something they are part of and responsible for sustaining. By strengthening civic learning from the earliest grades through graduation, New York can equip students with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to participate fully in our democracy — not just for the next 250 years, but starting right now.

## UNIVERSAL PRE-K

NYSUT supports the executive budget's continued commitment to statewide universal pre-K as a critical investment in children, families and educators. The budget takes an important step by requiring school districts to provide a full-day pre-K slot to any 4-year-old whose parents request it beginning in 2028-29 — creating a true universal pre-K system and a significant accomplishment for New York.

Universal pre-K is early childhood education and should be housed within public schools, staffed by trained, certified educators who can give our youngest learners the strong start they deserve. While the UPK program has always contained a 10 percent minimum set-aside for community-based organizations, it was designed to have certified teachers provide these services over the long term. Yet in 2024-25, less than half of students enrolled in state-funded pre-K were educated in a public school setting.

High-quality, universal and accessible pre-K promotes lifelong learning, advances equity and strengthens communities. To achieve these outcomes, pre-K must be available statewide and delivered as developmentally appropriate programming. Expanding access helps close opportunity gaps before they widen, allows for curriculum alignment, reduces transitions for young students and provides families the predictability they need.

The time has come to move to a public school-based system. New investments in the executive budget provide resources to make this transition possible. NYSUT urges the Legislature to require school districts to gradually increase the share of pre-K students educated by certified teachers in public schools — beginning with 20 percent in 2028-29 and increasing by 20 percent annually until full implementation in 2032-33. Smaller districts lacking sufficient enrollment could be exempted during the phase-in. Capital costs for pre-K classrooms in district-owned buildings are aidable when the Office of Facilities Planning determines space is insufficient.

A stable, qualified and well-supported workforce is essential. As the program expands, quality and educational integrity must keep pace — ensuring every child benefits from the high-quality early learning universal pre-K was intended to provide.

## BACK TO BASICS MATH

Educators are professionals who are deeply committed to continuous improvement. When given access to the latest research- and evidence-based instructional strategies, educators embrace professional learning opportunities that help them better serve their students.

We saw this firsthand with the Science of Reading initiative, a comprehensive program that has reached thousands of educators across New York with the most current, research-based strategies for teaching reading. The response from educators has been overwhelmingly positive.

Now, we have an opportunity to build on that success with mathematics instruction. Just as we demonstrated with literacy, when teachers are trusted as professionals and given the resources to lead this work, we can strengthen instruction and improve outcomes for students. Mathematics proficiency is foundational to student success, and our educators are ready to meet this moment.

With the right support, NYSUT will be proud to deliver high-quality, accessible professional learning that equips teachers with the techniques they need to help every child build a strong foundation in numeracy.

Governor Hochul's executive budget includes \$2 million for NYSUT's Education and Learning Trust to train K-5 educators in evidence-based best practices for math instruction. We strongly support this investment and urge the Legislature to include it in the enacted budget.

## EXPENSE-BASED AIDS

First, we want to thank you for phasing-in an increase to the aidable BOCES salary cap from \$30,000 to \$60,000 last year. This was a long-overdue change. The cap had not been updated in more than 30 years, and this sent an important signal that the state recognizes both the value of BOCES programs and the educators who make them work.

That same commitment to fairness and equity now needs to extend to districts that do not participate in BOCES. Special Services Aid serves nine such districts, including the Big 5 cities, and functions as the counterpart to BOCES Aid.

Thank you for increasing the Career Education Aid ceiling last year and expanding eligibility to ninth-grade students.

As the last meaningful update to this aid ceiling was nearly 20 years ago, NYSUT is calling for a two-year increase in the Special Services Career Education Aid ceiling to \$4,880. This change would invest an additional \$39 million over two years and ensure that students in the Big 5 and other affected districts receive career and technical education funding that they need.

## Capital Investments

NYSUT also strongly supports the following:

- The proposal to allow renewable energy projects to be treated as a primary building expense;
- That community schools and the spaces that make them effective, such as medical and dental facilities, be fully eligible for building aid. These investments directly support students' health, learning and long-term success.
- An extension of public-sector lease terms for BOCES from 10 years to 20 years. This change would make it more practical for BOCES programs to invest in and adapt spaces that meet the needs of students and educators, particularly when renovations or specialized facilities are required.
- For BOCES to be granted the authority to issue long-term debt for capital construction using the same approval process already in place for BOCES administrative budgets. This would require approval from a majority of the component school boards, rather than a public referendum and would provide a responsible path to meeting the increasing demand for high-quality BOCES programs across the state.

## TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND CERTIFICATION

NYSUT's new report, *Forging a New Future: Teacher Recruitment and Certification*, presents a clear, research-driven roadmap for boosting New York's teacher pipeline, a challenge we know is not unique to our state. To develop these recommendations, NYSUT convened a statewide working group of educators and teacher educators to identify the barriers keeping talented candidates out of the profession and the programs that are already working to support aspiring and early career educators.

The report calls for expanding and strengthening proven strategies, including grow-your-own recruitment programs, student teacher stipends, teacher residencies, apprenticeships and programs that support candidates from preparation through certification. These models are most effective when candidates are able to complete their training without additional financial obstacles.

In New York state, student teaching is an unpaid requirement of at least 14 weeks that limits candidates' ability to earn income during this critical period of their preparation. Because of this commitment, students who would otherwise work part-time while taking classes or adult learners looking to enter the teaching profession cannot continue to work during student teaching. For many aspiring educators, this creates a financial barrier that can push people out of the profession before they ever enter it.

That is why NYSUT urges the state to invest \$10 million to establish student teacher stipends. States such as Michigan and Pennsylvania have already moved to compensate student teachers, recognizing that paid clinical practice is essential to strengthening the educator workforce.

If we are serious about building a sustainable educator pipeline and maximizing the impact of existing investments in residencies, apprenticeships and recruitment programs, we must remove the financial barriers embedded in our certification system. A targeted investment in student teacher stipends would send a clear message: New York values the profession, understands today's economic realities and is committing to a strong future for public education.

## 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, 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

Teacher Centers are one of New York's most effective, educator-driven investments, and they exist because the Legislature recognized that the best professional learning is led by educators, for educators. For decades, Teacher Centers have served as the state's primary, state-funded system for educator professional development, supporting more than 200 high-need districts, BOCES, nonpublic and charter schools across New York. These centers are nimble, responsive and deeply rooted in the real needs of classrooms.

Every day, Teacher Centers are doing the quiet yet essential work that keeps schools strong. They mentor and support new and early-career teachers at a time when retention has never been more critical. They provide hands-on professional learning in areas like literacy, STEM, robotics, coding and 3-D science instruction. They help educators strengthen pre-K through 12 content knowledge, support students with disabilities, English language learners, and struggling students, and offer workshops that bring families into the learning process, from technology use to strategies for supporting learning at home.

At a moment when teacher shortages persist, student needs are growing more complex, and educators are being asked to do more than ever, eliminating Teacher Center funding sends the wrong message. The executive budget's proposal would dismantle a proven, cost-effective infrastructure that supports educators, stabilizes the workforce and directly improves student outcomes.

We advocate for the restoration of this program at \$21.4 million. This investment is essential to support New York's educators, enhance student achievement and ensure teachers have the tools they need to be effective.

## MANY THREADS, ONE FABRIC

As part of our core mission to educate children and prepare them to be informed, productive citizens, educators also have a duty to provide students with safe, welcoming environments where they can focus on learning.

This commitment is what gives rise to the Many Threads, One Fabric initiative, and why we are asking for its continuation this year.

New York is a big state, and our students come from vastly different backgrounds and life experiences. Through the Many Threads, One Fabric training series, NYSUT has reached thousands of educators across the state, providing professional development that helps them better understand and connect with the wide range of students they serve. The program expands educators' perspectives and equips them with practical strategies to create classroom environments where all students feel welcome and can thrive.

Beyond the classroom, these insights also help improve relations among colleagues in professional settings, fostering more collaborative and supportive communities that extend beyond the schoolhouse walls.

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

The initiative continues to grow. In December 2025, NYSUT convened the second meeting of the Members of Color Affinity and Action group, connecting educators who bring valuable perspectives and firsthand experience to the work of reaching all students. In its second year, this conference maxed out at 500 educators from across the state in attendance, with demand far exceeding available space. To meet this demand, we plan to utilize a larger conference venue for the 2026 meeting.

While funding for this initiative was not included in the executive budget, we are requesting \$1.2 million to continue this important professional development. This investment will help ensure our educators have the tools they need to serve every student effectively.

## CARBON-FREE & HEALTHY SCHOOLS

The average K-12 school or public university building in New York is 50-70 years old, according to state data. These facilities were not built for today's world, or tomorrow's. They struggle to handle basic electrical demands, let alone modern infrastructure upgrades like solar installations, clean-energy upgrades or modern air filtration. Many still need fundamental repairs just to be safe and healthy places to learn and work.

Our schools and campuses are on the front lines of New York's climate future. Educators are already helping students engage in science-based, hands-on learning about climate change and preparing them for real careers in green technology, clean construction and environmental restoration. But schools shouldn't just teach this work; they must model it.

If we are serious about climate readiness, workforce preparation and student health, we cannot keep asking students to learn about the future in buildings stuck in the past. Investing in modern, sustainable school infrastructure is urgent and essential.

Therefore, we urge the state to begin the process of addressing these important upgrades through the passage of a multi-billion-dollar Carbon Free and Healthy Schools Bond Act; the use of existing bonding authority, which has been utilized by the state for other such projects; or some other funding mechanism available to New York.

In addition, funding for the transition to electric school buses is desperately needed by our districts. New York's mandate for 100 percent zero-emissions buses in 2035 was a bold step, but the upfront costs to reach that goal are significant for districts. Any funding that is created to address our schools' carbon neutral needs must help districts meet this mandate.

With the right financial resources at our disposal, we can make school buildings and campuses models of green infrastructure, healthier for students and educators, create good union jobs and save taxpayers millions in energy costs.

## CORPORATE CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

Charter schools were created more than three decades ago to serve as laboratories for developing and sharing innovative educational practices with public schools. The original vision was one of collaboration: Small, educator-led schools that would experiment with new approaches and share what they learned to benefit all students.

While well-intended, this promise of partnership has gone largely unfulfilled, even as corporate charter schools continue to receive billions in state funding. Instead of innovation shared freely with public schools, we have seen the rise of a corporate charter industry that prioritizes business interests over students, operates without meaningful public oversight and drains resources from the public schools that serve every child and family.

The financial impact on public education has been staggering. In New York's most charter-saturated districts, 61 percent of Foundation Aid increases over the last five years went to corporate charters rather than to student supports in public schools. In New York City, 83 percent of Foundation Aid increases were consumed by charter tuition payments.

When a student leaves for a charter school, the public school loses their entire per-pupil funding, but the costs do not disappear. Schools still need to heat buildings, run buses, maintain libraries and cafeterias and provide special education services. These stranded costs force cuts to programs that benefit the students who remain.

Meanwhile, charter schools operate with little accountability to the communities they serve. Public schools are governed by elected school boards, hold open meetings and maintain public budgets that taxpayers can review. Public schools require public input on everything — when a district wants to buy a new school bus, taxpayers get to have a say. Yet when charter corporations want to open entirely new schools in a community, local taxpayers are not even consulted.

Charter schools are run by private, unelected boards that make decisions behind closed doors with hidden financial records. Audits have uncovered hundreds of thousands of dollars in improper payments and billing for services never provided. This is public money that could and should be supporting students in classrooms.

Charter schools also consistently underserve the students with the greatest needs. Unlike public schools, which welcome every child who walks through the door, charter schools can cherry-pick their students — selecting those who best fit their business model. Charters also filter out students through complex applications available only in English, mandatory parent volunteer hours, harsh discipline policies and “counseling out” struggling students. When these students are pushed out, they return to public schools that now have fewer resources to serve them.

Where public schools welcome all students and unite communities through inclusive education and local democratic control, corporate charter schools too often create division by operating outside these structures.

NYSUT is advocating for legislation to bring necessary transparency and accountability to the charter industry.

First, we support legislation to restore local control, giving communities the right to vote on whether a charter school can open or expand in their district — the same democratic voice they have over their public school budgets.

Second, we support S.77 (Liu)/A.6112 (Benedetto), which would give the Board of Regents final approval authority over all proposed and renewed charter schools, ensuring a uniform application process that considers fiscal, programmatic and educational stability for all students.

Finally, we support A.6884 (Benedetto), which would establish essential transparency and accountability requirements for the charter industry. Any school receiving public tax dollars should be subject to the same open meetings laws, public records requirements and financial disclosure standards as public schools.

## 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, did not 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 is not just in buildings or programs. It is 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 issues and for your continued partnership in supporting public education. Together, we can ensure that New York's public schools remain among the nation's finest and continue to grow as true centers of community life and learning.