

Testimony of UJA-Federation of New York

**The Joint Fiscal Committees of the New York State Legislature
Elementary and Secondary Education Hearing for Fiscal Year 2026-2027**
Submitted by:
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On behalf of UJA-Federation of New York, our network of nonprofit partners and those we serve, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the importance of maintaining and expanding support for education in New York State.

Established more than 100 years ago, UJA-Federation of New York is one of the nation's largest local philanthropies. Central to UJA's mission is to care for those in need—identifying and meeting the needs of New Yorkers of all backgrounds and Jews everywhere. UJA supports an expansive network of nearly 100 nonprofit organizations serving those that are most vulnerable and in need of programs and services and allocates over \$185 million each year to combat poverty and food insecurity, nurture mental health and well-being, respond to crises here and across the globe, and strengthen Jewish life.

Pre-Kindergarten

UJA's non-profit partners provide free New York City and/or state funded pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programs to young children across New York City, Westchester, and Long Island. UJA's non-profit partners that offer pre-k services provide a wide range of programs and resources to their communities. These programs offer extended hours and year-round care for children, which parents and/or guardians rely on to work and provide for their families. Providers are extremely knowledgeable of the specific needs of the communities they serve. Having access to free, high-quality pre-k supports families who may struggle to afford this service and, more importantly, prepares children for kindergarten and academic success.

UJA supports the inclusion of funding in the Executive Budget to create state funded pre-kindergarten programs statewide by the 2028-2029 school year. The Executive Budget also includes a commitment to increasing the rates of current state funded pre-kindergarten programs. Expansion to a true state funded universal pre-kindergarten system must be coupled with supporting the increased rates for current providers. It is the only way to create a strong foundation for the statewide expansion to succeed upon.

Currently, nonprofits that house and oversee pre-k programs, have and continue to provide high-quality education to the children who are enrolled in their programs despite being underfunded by the state to do so. Five pre-k sites in Long Island overseen by nonprofits in UJA's network receive between \$5,400 and \$5,800 per child from the state for a ten-month pre-k program. They receive no other funding from local sources like New York City pre-k programs. Nonprofits also have no ability to negotiate the rate they receive with each being determined by the amount of foundation aid a school district receives. Nonprofits do not want to ask school districts to take money away from other education programs to increase pre-k rates, putting them in a difficult position. Either they agree to be compensated at rates that do not cover the costs of services or refuse to oversee the state funded pre-k programs.

Before participating in state funded pre-k, providers in the UJA network in Long Island charged upward of \$16,000 per child for a ten-month program. This was determined to be the true cost of operating these programs. At the \$5,400 to \$5,800 rates, agencies are operating at a loss, with one saying they try to make up the funding deficit through offering extended hours and relying on profit from membership dues and other agency services. Despite these resources, this nonprofit's state funded pre-k program continues to operate at a deficit.

Lower rates also impact what programs pay teachers and assistant teachers. Due to the low rates they receive, one agency in Long Island pays lead teachers in their pre-k program between \$33,000 and \$35,000 a year while an individual with similar credentials gets paid upward of \$65,000 in New York City. Long Island pre-k programs are prone to losing staff to programs either in New York City or to local school districts who can compensate their employees at higher rates. It is becoming increasingly financially challenging for these programs to attract and retain staff which is crucial to them remaining open.

The nonprofits in UJA's network recognize the positive impact high-quality early childhood education has on young children's development and are committed to providing this service to the communities they serve. But they must be compensated for the true cost of overseeing these programs so they can continue to meet the needs of the students in their programs and compensate staff at a wage that is commensurate with their training and experience.

UJA requests the enacted budget includes \$561 million to create universal pre-kindergarten programs statewide by the 2028-2029 school year. Additionally, UJA requests increased aid per four-year-old in current pre-kindergarten programs to equal or exceed the school district's selected foundation aid or \$10,000. If the rate is \$10,000 it is still less than what many nonprofits in UJA's network charged for similar private pre-k programs. However, continuing to fund pre-k programs below \$6,000 per student is fiscally irresponsible. Increasing rates to a minimum of \$10,000 per child or the school district's foundation aid will alleviate fiscal strain and make this program more sustainable. UJA also urges the New York State Education Department to perform annual reviews of pre-kindergarten rates, adjusting them according to inflation so that they continue to fund programs appropriately.

Preschool Special Education Programs

Inadequate state rates have directly impacted preschool special education programs' ability to remain open. Community Based Organizations (CBOs) operate most of these programs and

struggle to recruit and retain staff and teachers to their programs. This is directly related to how much NYSED pays these programs. Many staff at CBOs leave to work in higher paying positions in public schools or universal pre-kindergarten programs. CBOs cannot pay their staff competitive wages based on the current rates they receive. If preschool special education programs do not have enough staff, they cannot serve children with disabilities who have a legal right to attend these classes.

To stabilize and support these programs, NYSED must develop an annual rate-setting mechanism for preschool special education evaluations and programs. This must ensure rates increase to at least the same rate as public school funding. The tuition rate-setting methodology will support the long-term stability of preschool special education programs preventing program closures and maintaining access to timely services.

Security for Nonpublic Schools

In recent years, Jewish schools across New York have faced increased security threats. Many nonpublic schools are unable to cover the additional costs that increased security concerns place on their budgets. Providing a secure learning environment is a core responsibility for all schools. It is imperative that New York State continues to invest in the Non-Public Safety Equipment (NPSE) program to provide nonpublic schools with the additional financial resources they require to maintain student safety.

UJA is grateful that the Executive Budget increased funding by \$5 million for a total of \$75 million for the NPSE program. Given the increased security needs of New York Jewish day schools, **UJA urges the Legislature to increase the investment in the NPSE program to \$90 million to enable schools to better safeguard the educational environments for their students.** The security needs of New York's Jewish day schools are intensifying and evolving, and additional funding is required to meet these new needs.

STEM, Art and Music Funding for Nonpublic Schools

Last year, New York State increased funding to \$85.5 million to support Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education in nonpublic schools-\$5 million of which was dedicated for arts and music education. This increased investment bolstered nonpublic schools' ability to offer rigorous STEM programs to better prepare students for competitive careers as well as maintained access to arts and music education.

The demand for and rapid changes in STEM instruction continues to outpace New York State's investments in the program. The Executive Budget's investment of \$73 million will provide less funding than nonpublic schools need to continue to offer high quality STEM, art, and music programs. **UJA urges support for the program be increased to \$130 million in FY 2027 to better meet current demand.**

MSR/CAP

The state of New York reimburses nonpublic schools for the cost of administering various state mandates (the Mandated Services Reimbursement program) and for reporting student attendance (the Comprehensive Attendance Policy). UJA is grateful the Executive Budget included \$240,000,000 million for MSR/CAP funding-an increased investment in this program that has

been historically underfunded in the past. **UJA urges the Legislature to include \$240,000,000 for MSR/CAP in the FY 2027 enacted budget providing funding to more accurately support the program.**

Adult Literacy Education (ALE)

UJA thanks the Governor for including \$9.3 million in the Executive Budget for the ALE program, ensuring that programs will remain whole. **UJA requests support from the Legislature for the investment of an additional \$5.7 million in ALE programs.** State funding for the recent ALE Request for Proposals was insufficient to meet the needs of adult literacy learners across the state, resulting in high performing programs having to terminate in-demand classes and interrupt student learning. Supplemental ALE funds are needed to allow providers on the NYSED ALE eligible-but-not-awarded list to restart their classes and re-engage learners.

ALE funds English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Adult Basic Education (ABE) and High School Equivalency (HSE) preparation classes and is one of the few state funding streams able to address the needs of lower-level learners. In New York State, there are 3.9 million individuals who lack their high school diploma, English language proficiency, or both. The additional \$5.7 million will enable an additional 3,500 students to benefit from adult education in FY 2027.

Limited skills make it difficult for individuals to support their children in school, access health care, secure and maintain living-wage jobs, advocate for their rights as workers, and fully participate in the political process. Many adults in New York State with limited literacy skills are women and people of color; a majority are immigrants, including many who are undocumented; others are Black, Indigenous or People of Color who were born and raised in the United States but do not have a high school level education.

Adult literacy education is the key to economic security and social mobility. Median wages for adults with a high school diploma or its equivalent are 24% greater than for those without a diploma. Furthermore, higher levels of literacy are associated with greater health knowledge, more efficient use of healthcare services, and the ability to manage chronic health conditions and communicate with healthcare providers. Investing in adult literacy education yields proven benefits for individuals and communities.

Less than 3 percent (6,800 New Yorkers) are served by state-funded adult literacy classes each year. In order to serve more New Yorkers in need of these vital classes, **UJA requests the Legislature add an additional \$5.7 million for a total of \$15 million for Adult Literacy Education in the FY 2027 budget.**

Foundation Aid Formula

UJA-Federation is a member of the Coalition for Equitable Education Funding (CEEF). CEEF is made up of more than 120 advocacy and civil rights organizations, social services providers, and groups representing students, parents, and educators, who advocate for the resources needed to ensure every student receives a high-quality education.

The FY 2027 Executive Budget fully funds the formula for the upcoming year. However, the formula itself includes outdated and incomplete measures of need and has not evolved to account for growing costs, particularly in large urban districts like New York City. Last year, changes to the formula were made in the FY 2026 adopted budget resulting in New York City receiving \$314 million less than they would have received if the formula had remained constant. The shortfall was due to the poverty weight used to update the formula that relies on low federal poverty guidelines and measures poverty the same in every school district across New York State. It does not account for the tremendous variation in the cost of living across different regions of New York State. Additional changes must be made to the formula or New York City schools will continue to be funded less than they would have been if the formula was not updated. Unfortunately, the Executive Budget does not include any changes to the Foundation Aid Formula.

UJA with CEEF requests the following changes be made to the Foundation Aid Formula to help ensure schools can meet the needs of all students:

- **Update the Regional Cost Index (RCI) as proposed in S. 8125 and A.9049** to more accurately account the different costs to educate students across the state. Personnel and supplies costs vary across New York State, with places like New York City and Long Island needing additional resources to cover these. The Foundation Aid Formula continues to use outdated RCI values from twenty years ago—despite costs having risen significantly since 2006. The State must use updated current RCI values to better reflect current education costs.
- **Include additional funding for students who are homeless and students in foster care as proposed in S. 8139 and A. 9048.** More than 154,000 students are homeless and upwards of 6,700 are in foster care in New York City. At present, the Foundation Aid Formula does not provide any additional funding to help schools support these student populations, both of whom face tremendous obstacles to success in school and have educational needs distinct from those of all students in poverty.

UJA appreciates the Executive Budget fully funding the current Foundation Aid Formula. Without addressing its shortcomings, the Foundation Aid Formula will continue to underfund some school districts like New York City negatively impacting the students who are supposed to benefit from the funding.

Conclusion

UJA-Federation of New York respectfully urges your consideration and support of these programs that assist our state's most vulnerable and neediest individuals and the organizations that serve them. Thank you for your consideration. Please contact Faith Behum at behumf@ujafedny.org or 212-836-1338 with any questions.