

**Testimony of
Andrew Sako,
President of the
Faculty Federation of Erie Community College
to the
Senate Finance Committee
Liz Krueger, Chair
and
Assembly Ways and Means Committee
J. Gary Pretlow, Chair
on the
Proposed 2026-27 Executive Budget for
Higher Education
Feb. 24, 2026**

Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Pretlow, honorable members of the Legislature and distinguished staff, I am Andrew Sako, President of the Faculty Federation of Erie Community College.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the proposed 2026-27 New York State Executive Budget for Higher Education. My testimony will focus on the issues facing Erie Community College, the 29 other SUNY community colleges and nearly all their faculty and staff.

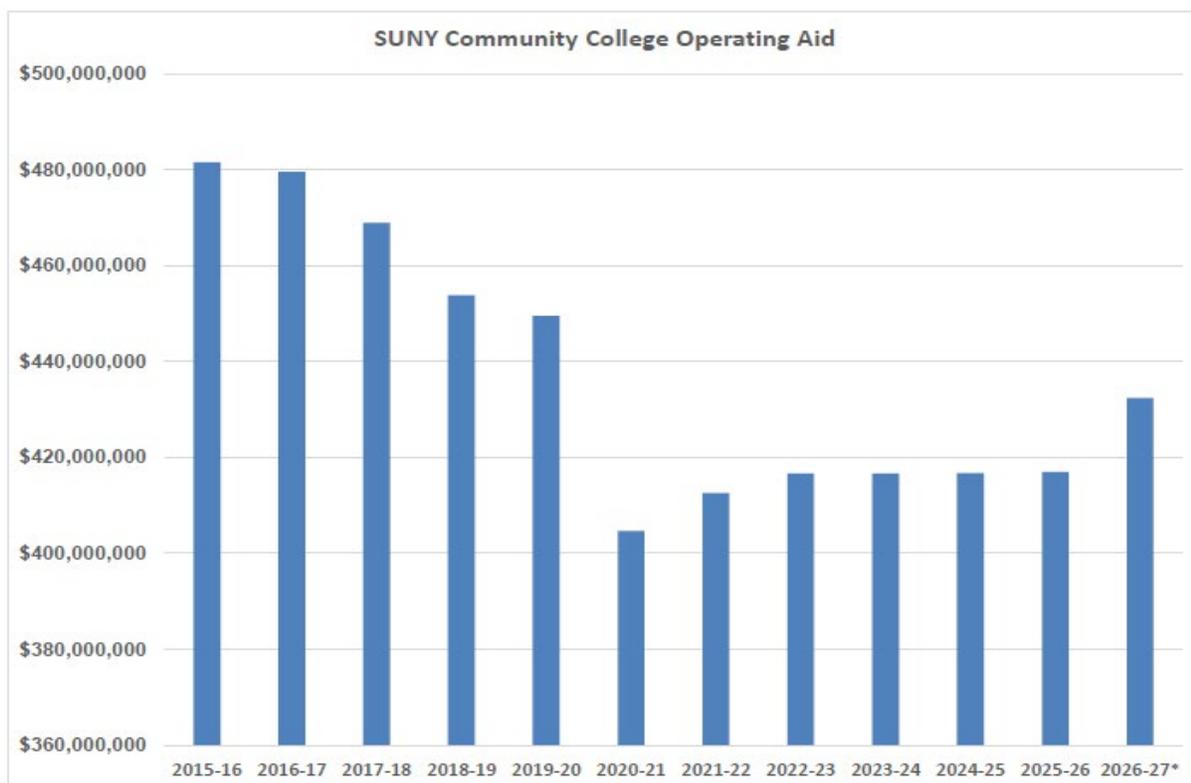
Community Colleges

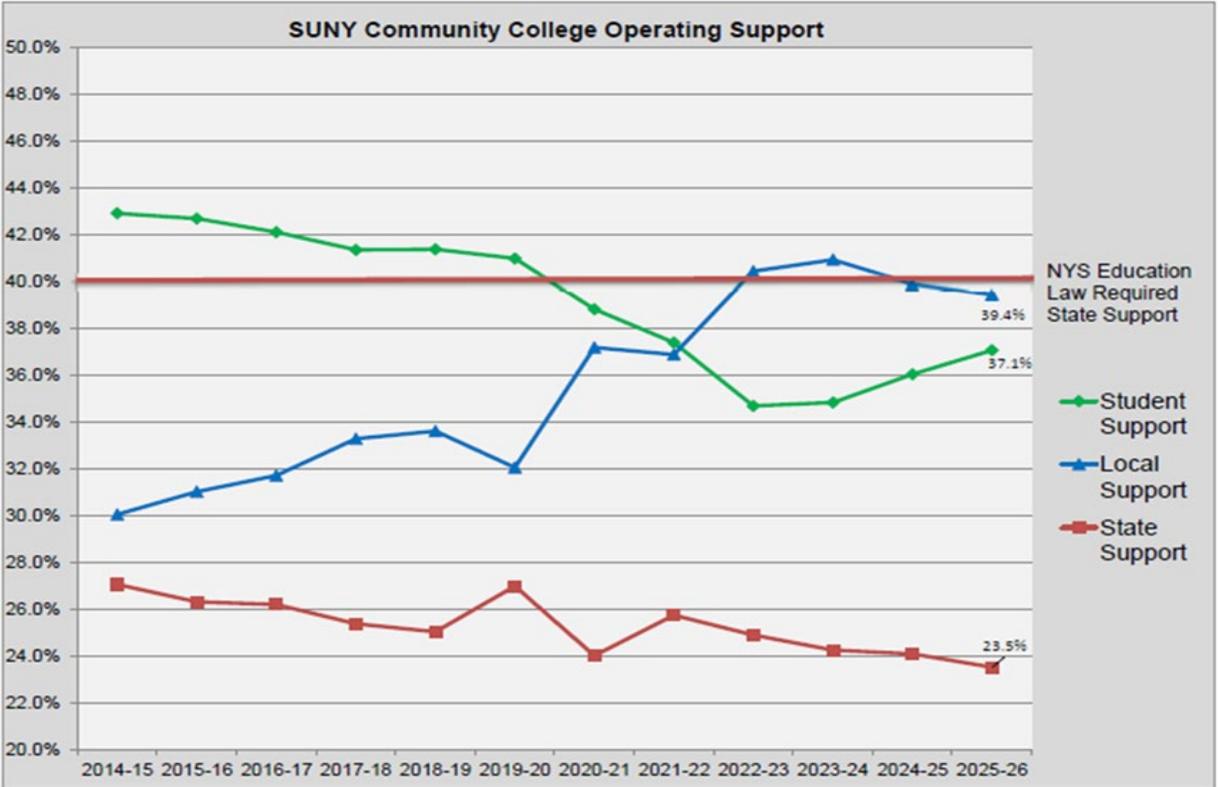
Community colleges educate and prepare students for the workforce and advance social mobility. They provide an essential foundation for those seeking to move on to four-year campuses or universities. Community colleges are also able to collaborate with regional employers and develop and provide training to address specific local workforce needs.

While we appreciate the modest increase in operating aid in the executive budget, we are disappointed that our community colleges are slated to receive essentially the same level of base aid funding allotted to them in last year’s enacted budget. To fully meet local demand more support is needed.

State education law requires the state to pay 40 percent of community college operating costs. We know the Legislature is committed to supporting our community colleges, but the proposed state funding is still well below that which is required by law.

As the charts below illustrate, SUNY community colleges, even with recent increases in enrollment, are still receiving significantly less in operating aid than they did in 2015.





Over that same period, students paid the lion's share of the operating costs of these campuses. Over a 10-year period — from 2008-09 to 2018-19 — SUNY community college students went from paying 40.8 percent of the operating costs to approximately 41.4 percent. New York students' financial burden to attend community college is nearly double the national average. Meanwhile, the state's contribution decreased from 30.8 percent to 25 percent during the period from 2019- 2023 and remains appallingly low today even though New York ranks as the sixth most expensive state for community college students. Also concerning is the fact that the state contribution varies from college to college.

Year after year, budget after budget, we have seen the state "notwithstanding" the law at the expense of our students and community colleges. This practice must stop. Accordingly, we call on the state to provide an additional \$101.7 million to CUNY and \$95 million to SUNY, which would bring the state to 33 percent of what it is statutorily required to pay to these institutions. While this would still be well short of the state's full 40 percent obligation, it would be a good first step.

We would also welcome an opportunity to participate in any process designed to create a new funding model for these institutions. The FTE funding model, which allocates state dollars based on a set amount multiplied by the number of FTE students enrolled, is inadequate. The reliance on enrollment trends over the past decade has resulted in unpredictable funding and general instability. We should insulate our campuses from short-term enrollment fluctuations and prepare them for long-term growth and sustainability.

Moreover, while we are grateful for the introduction of the funding floor in 2019 and recognize that it was a valuable tool during the pandemic, it is far from a panacea. Budget after budget, the message to the community colleges is to be grateful for the funding floor because without it, things would have been much worse. The time has come to do more than just assure the colleges that they will get 100 percent of last year's funding. This model fails to recognize that community colleges are losing money, even with the funding floor, because the cost of everything has gone up since 2019. Funding for our community colleges has not remotely kept up with the rate of inflation. Without a significant increase in base aid funding, colleges will have no choice but to reduce academic programs and student services and shift costs to our students through tuition increases. To break this cycle and truly help our community colleges, NYSUT supports establishing a predictable funding floor, which guarantees that base funding be equal to no less than the highest amount received in any of the previous three fiscal years, indexes state contributions to inflation and protects colleges against enrollment-based funding reductions. Indexing the funding floor to inflation, using the Commonfund Higher Education Price Index (HEPI) would require a \$15.4 million investment from the state.

Even with the positive impact of the SUNY Reconnect program, many of our community colleges are continuing to deal with low enrollment and are struggling to survive. In fact, twelve of the thirty campuses may be characterized as fiscally distressed. To address this problem, NYSUT is advocating for an increase in small college aid, which is woefully underfunded at \$940,000. To provide our community colleges with the support they need, we will be advocating for this fund to be increased to \$3.7 million.

The CUNY ASAP program was created to help students earn their associate degrees as quickly as possible — with a goal of graduating at least 50 percent of the enrollees within three years. The program is designed to help students overcome systemic barriers and other hardships that prevent them from graduating by providing them with academic, social and financial support. The ASAP model has been successfully implemented at Westchester Community College through their Viking Roads program. Student retention and graduation rates have gone up dramatically at both the CUNY and Westchester Community College ASAP programs. We are seeking to expand ASAP to all our SUNY community colleges.

While we were encouraged to see continued funding for the SUNY ASAP program in the executive budget proposal, we are disappointed that this plan only covers 13 of our 30 community colleges and concerned that the funds allocated (approximately \$2,000 per student as opposed to \$3,400 per student spent at CUNY and the Viking Roads program) are insufficient to guarantee program success.

In addition to funding for ASAP-like programs, we are asking for an additional \$125 million to stabilize our community colleges and put our students on a path to equity and social mobility. This long overdue investment will enable community colleges to stabilize faculty and staff, bolster student services, reduce financial losses from high-cost programs like nursing and advanced manufacturing and invest in scaling high-need programs.

Public Higher Education Access for All

Every dollar invested in SUNY and CUNY yields even greater returns for New York's tax base. However, a continued shift of costs from the state to students has placed additional financial burdens on our students and their families and has reduced access to the high-quality education every New Yorker deserves.

NYSUT continues to advocate for a public higher education system that delivers results and sets up our students for success without leaving them hopelessly in debt. To accomplish this, we support state investment in SUNY and CUNY two- and four-year colleges and universities and oppose tuition and fee increases. We must not pass additional costs to our students. To improve access to public higher education, we support providing every New Yorker with 60 tuition and fee-free credits to be used at any SUNY or CUNY school.

We would like to thank the governor for taking an important first step in making public higher education a reality for more New Yorkers with her New York Opportunity Promise Scholarship initiative for our public community colleges.

We are asking for an investment to expand the New York Opportunity Promise Scholarship so that more students can have access to a world-class public higher education at our SUNY and CUNY colleges and universities. While we support the changes in this year's executive budget proposal, which expands the list of high-demand fields and allows students aged 25 to 55 who are enrolled in an approved program leading to an associate degree in nursing to participate in this scholarship program, even if they have a post-secondary degree, we believe the program should be made available to more New Yorkers. Accordingly, we ask that it be expanded to include every SUNY and CUNY college or university that offers associate degrees in the academic programs that have been identified as shortage areas, cover students ages 18-55 and allow applicants who have obtained a post-secondary degree (instead of restricting them) so that they are able to enroll in all of the approved high-demand programs, not just nursing.

Conclusion

New York's public colleges and universities form a world-class higher education system that is essential to the state's economy and innovation. We are at a pivotal moment — we must do the right thing and embrace public higher education, invest in this system as a public good that fuels an engine of social mobility for millions and serves as a driver of economic growth for our state.

I ask the Legislature to fund public higher education to the level our students deserve, and our state requires; reject any cuts to public higher education in the executive budget proposal; stand with educators and students to ensure that the choice to pursue quality, public higher education will not be taken away from those who can least afford to lose it; and build upon the executive budget proposal by securing additional aid for our colleges, universities and teaching hospitals so they may continue to provide the high-quality services New Yorkers deserve and have come to expect.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for all you have done to improve public higher education in New York state. I look forward to continuing our work.